MARK TIDE
EDITOR

CLARENCE
BUDINGTON
KELLAND

Books by

CLARENCE BUDINGTON KELLAND

SUDDEN JIM. Illustrated.
THE HIDDEN SPRING. Illustrated.
MARK TIDD. Illustrated.
MARK TIDD IN THE BACKWOODS. Illustrated.
MARK TIDD IN BUSINESS. Illustrated.
MARK TIDD'S CITADEL. Illustrated.
MARK TIDD, EDITOR
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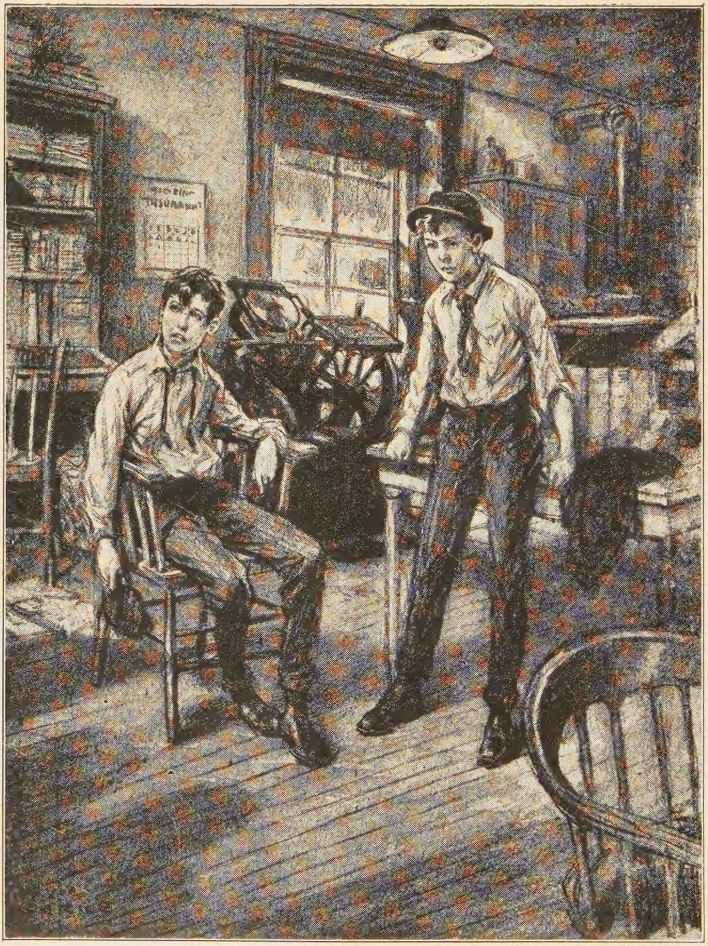

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PLUNK AND TALLOW WERE THERE LOOKING DILAPIDATED AND FRIGHTENED

MARK TIDD, EDITOR

BY

CLARENCE BUDINGTON KELLAND

AUTHOR OF

"MARK TIDD" "MARK TIDD IN THE BACKWOODS"

"MARK TIDD'S CITADEL" ETC

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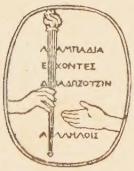

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MARK TIDD, EDITOR

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ILLUSTRATIONS

PLUNK AND TALLOW WERE THERE LOOKING DILAPIDATED AND FRIGHTENED . . . . . *Frontispiece*

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MARK TIDD, EDITOR

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CHAPTER I

"BINNEY," says Mark Tidd to me, "the Wicksville *Trumpet* is b-b-busted."

"Well," says I, "it's been cracked for quite a spell. It hain't been tootin' loud enough to notice for a year."

"Used to be a g-good newspaper once," says Mark.

"Yes—once," says I, "but not more 'n once. That hain't any record. If I'd been gettin' out a paper fifty-two times a year for twenty years I bet I could 'a' made more 'n one of those times a good one."

Mark looked at me sudden out of his little eyes that had to sort of *peek* up over his fat cheeks. "Binney," says he, "you hain't as useless as I calc'lated. That's an idea."

"Oh," says I, "is that what it is? I sort of figgered maybe it was a notion."

Mark turned the whole of him around so he could face Plunk Smalley and Tallow Martin, who were standing behind him. By rights you ought to have a turn-table to move Mark around on, like they have for locomotives. He's 'most as heavy as a locomotive, and when he talks sometimes it sounds like a locomotive pulling a load up-hill, snorting and puffing—he stutters so.

"Fellows," says he, "this Binney Jenks is g-g-gettin' so he talks like a minstrel show. Makes reg'lar j-jokes one right after another. Looks l-like he hain't got time to be sensible any more."

"But what's the idea?" says Tallow.

"Want to talk to my father first," says Mark. "C-come on."

Mark's father didn't use to have any money at all. He just sat around inventing things and reading Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. First he'd invent a little, and then he'd read a little, and it was a wonder he didn't get the two mixed up. But finally he up and invented a turbine-engine, and it made such a pile of money for him that he didn't need to do a thing but read Gibbon and carry bushel-baskets of dollars to the bank every little while.

Usually when a man goes and gets rich all of a sudden there's some difference in him. He

builds him a big house and hires a lot of folks to brush his clothes and make his beds and cook chicken for him three meals a day. But not Mr. Tidd. You wouldn't ever think he had a cent more than he used to. He kept his little machine-shop in the barn, and wore overalls mostly—when he didn't get on his Sunday suit by mistake. He was as like as not to do that very thing, if Mark's mother didn't keep her eye on him. He was a fine kind of a man, but he couldn't remember things for a cent. If Mrs. Tidd sent him to the grocery for a bottle of vanilla, he'd like as not bring home a bag of onions. As far as he'd get with remembering, you see, would be that he wanted something with a smell to it.

Mrs. Tidd was fine, too. She scolded quite considerable, but that was just make-believe. If you'd come in sudden and tell her you were hungry and wanted a piece of bread-and-butter she'd sort of frown, and say you couldn't have it and that it wasn't good for boys to be stuffing themselves between meals—and then, most likely, she'd call you back and give you a piece of pie.

Getting rich hadn't changed her, either. Once she tried keeping a hired girl, but it only lasted a week. She claimed it was more work follow-

ing the girl around and saving what she wasted than it was to do the work itself.

Well, we hustled up to Mark's house and went back to his father's shop. Mr. Tidd, in greasy overalls, sat right smack in the middle of the floor, reading a book that looked like it was pretty close to worn out. We didn't have to ask what it was—it was Gibbon. He didn't need to read it; he could have *recited* it if he'd a mind to.

"Hello, pa," says Mark.

Mr. Tidd looked up sort of vague, as if he wondered who this stranger could be. Then he says: "Howdy, Marcus Aurelius. I was hopin' maybe you'd drop in. Young eyes is better 'n old ones. Take a sort of a kind of a look around to see if you can find a chunk of lead—about four inches square and six inches long. Pretty hefty it was. Don't see how I come to mislay it."

We looked and looked, and no lead was anywhere to be found. But Mark did find a package with two pounds of butter in it.

"What's the b-b-butter for, pa?" he asked.

"Why," says Mr. Tidd, scratching his head, "why, seems to me like your ma sent me after that butter. Guess I must 'a' fetched it in and clean forgot it."

"Um!" says Mark, and out of the shop he went. In two minutes he came back, lugging the chunk of lead.

"Where'd you git it, Marcus Aurelius?" says Mr. Tidd.

"In the ice-b-box," says Mark. "Soon's I see that b-butter I knew right off where the lead was. You got the lead same time you did the butter, didn't you, pa?"

"Yes," says Mr. Tidd.

Mark nodded his head like he'd known it all along. "Sure," says he, "and you p-p-put the lead in the ice-box and fetched the butter out to the shop."

"I swan!" says Mr. Tidd. "I calc'late your ma 'u'd been some s'prised if she started spreadin' bread, eh?" He chuckled and chuckled, and so did we.

"Pa," says Mark, when we quit laughing, "there was s-s-somethin' I wanted to talk over with you."

"Go ahead," says Mr. Tidd.

"I got the idea from Binney," says Mark.

"Huh!" says I, "I hain't had any ideas this week."

"Your b-best ideas," says Mark, "is the ones you don't know you have."

"What's the idee?" asked Mr. Tidd.

"I'm thinkin'," says Mark, "of becomin' an editor."

"Sho!" says Mr. Tidd. He was surprised, and I guess maybe we three boys weren't surprised, too! But if you're around much with Mark Tidd you've got to get used to it. He's always surprising you; it's a regular business with him.

"What you goin' to be editor of?" says I.

"The Wicksville *Trumpet*—if pa's willin'," says he.

I grinned. I almost laughed out loud. "Shucks!" says I.

"I'll bet he can do it," says Plunk Smalley.

Mark didn't pay any attention to us, but just talked to Mr. Tidd. "The paper's b-b-busted," says he, stuttering for all that was in him, "and it's goin' to be s-s-sold at s-sheriff's sale. I figger it 'll go cheap. Now, pa, can't you make out to buy it for us?" Mind how he said *us?* That's the kind of a fellow he was. If you were a friend of his he stuck to you, and whatever he started you could be in if you wanted to.

"Um!" says Mr. Tidd. "A newspaper's a mighty important thing, Marcus Aurelius. I don't call to mind that Gibbon mentions any of 'em in this book, but they're important jest

the same. Figger you could make out to run it so's not to do any harm?"

"Yes, pa," says Mark.

"I'll talk it over with your ma," says Mr. Tidd. That was always the way with him. He had to talk over with Mrs. Tidd every last thing he did, if it wasn't anything more important than digging worms to go fishing. Yes, sir, he'd ask her what corner of the garden she thought was most likely for worms, and she'd tell him, and nobody could get him to dig anywheres else, either.

We all went traipsing into the kitchen, where Mrs. Tidd was baking a batch of fried-cakes.

"Git right out of here," she says. "I'm busy. Won't have you underfoot. Git right out."

"Now, ma," says Mr. Tidd, "we wasn't after fried-cakes—though one wouldn't go bad at this minute. We want to talk newspaper."

"Go talk it to somebody else," says Mrs. Tidd. "What about newspapers?" Now wasn't that just like her? First tell us to talk to somebody else, and then ask about it in the same breath. "Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd, you keep your hands off'n them fried-cakes," she said, sharp-like.

"Why," says Mr. Tidd, "Marcus Aurelius

wants I should buy the Wicksville *Trumpet* for him and the boys."

"Nonsense!" says Mrs. Tidd, with a sniff, handing two crisp, brown fried-cakes to each of us. "Nonsense!"

"Ma," says Mark, "it's goin' to be s-s-sold by the sheriff. Then there won't be any more paper here. How'll you ever git along without the p-p-p-personals to read?"

"Nonsense!" says Mrs. Tidd again.

"We can b-buy it dirt cheap," says Mark, "and we can run it and m-make money while we're doin' it, and sell out after a while and m-make a profit."

"What you'd make," says Mrs. Tidd, "would be monkeys of yourselves. No use arguin' with me. You can't do it." She turned her back and dropped some more cakes into the grease. "How much you calc'late it 'll cost?" says she.

"Two-three h-hunderd dollars," says Mark.

"Jest be throwin' it away," says Mrs. Tidd. "Now clear out. I don't want to hear another word about it."

We turned and went out. Before we were off the back stoop she came to the door. "You go to Lawyer Jones," says she, "and have him do the buyin'. Hain't one of you fit to dicker for a cent's worth of dried fish."

Mark he looked at me and winked. He knew his ma pretty well, and so did we; but this time I thought she meant what she said.

We all hurried down to Lawyer Jones's office and told him about it. He acted like he thought Mr. Tidd was crazy, and he said it was an outrage to put the control of a Moulder of Public Opinion—that's what he called a newspaper—into the hands of harum-scarum boys. But all the same he chuckled a little and says he figured Wicksville was in for stirring times and he was glad he was alive to watch what was going to happen.

"Tidd," said Lawyer Jones, when we were through talking about the paper, "did you know Henry Wigglesworth died last night?"

"No," says Mr. Tidd, looking as if he didn't quite know who Henry Wigglesworth was. But we boys knew Mr. Wigglesworth was 'most as rich as Mr. Tidd, so folks said. He owned a great big farm—hundreds of acres of it—just outside of town, and he was one of the directors of the bank and of the electric-light company. Altogether, folks believed he must have pretty close to a quarter of a million dollars, and that's a heap, I can tell you.

Everybody knew Mr. Wigglesworth, but not many were acquainted with him. What I

mean by acquainted is what we call so in Wicksville. It means you stop to talk with him, and drop in at his house and stay to dinner if you want to, and go to help when his horse gets sick, and ask him to come help if you get in some kind of a pickle, that's being acquainted. Well, nobody I know of was that way with Mr. Wigglesworth. I don't know as I ever heard of a man that had been inside Mr. Wigglesworth's big house, or that had had Mr. Wigglesworth in his house.

He wasn't exactly mean. No, he wasn't that. He was just big, and stern-looking, and dignified, and acted like he wanted folks to let him alone. Mark said to me one day that he acted like he was always sorry about something, but I don't see what made Mark think so. Anyhow, folks were afraid of him and let him alone, which, probably, was just what he wanted. But he was talked about considerable, you can bet.

The way he lived all alone, with just one man that did his cooking and helped take care of the big house, made folks talk, because it was queer. Come to think about it, everything about that house of Mr. Wigglesworth's was queer. Sort of spooky, I'd call it.

And now he was dead.

"Yes, sir," said Lawyer Jones, "he's dead and gone. I was called up there before daylight, Tidd, and what d'you suppose I found in the house?"

"Wa-al," says Mr. Tidd, "I dunno 's I'd be prepared to state."

"A boy," says Lawyer Jones, and looked at us with the kind of expression a man wears when he expects he's going to startle you. And he did it, all right.

"A b-boy!" says Mark Tidd.

"A boy," says Lawyer Jones again. "About fifteen, I calc'late he is."

"Who is he?" says Mark.

"That," says Lawyer Jones, "is what I'd give ten dollars to find out."

"Didn't you ask him?" says Tallow.

"He didn't know himself," says Lawyer Jones.

"Shucks!" says I, not meaning to be disrespectful.

"It's the truth," says Lawyer Jones. "Didn't know who he was nor what for he was in Henry Wigglesworth's house. Says his first name is Rock and that he didn't ever have a last name. Just Rock. Says a man named Peterkin brought him here four days ago, and left him. Says Wigglesworth never spoke to him, but just come

sneakin' in one night after he was in bed, with a lamp in his hand, and stood looking down at him. The boy says he pretended he was asleep. That's all there is to it, and I wish I had an idee what it all means."

I looked at Mark Tidd. His little eyes were twinkling the way they do when he's all wrought up and interested, and his lips were pressed together so they looked kind of white. You could see he was 'most eaten up with curiosity. But he didn't ask any questions.

In a few minutes we went out and walked back to Mr. Tidd's shop, where we all sat down to talk things over.

"R-reg'lar mystery," says Mark.

"Can't make no head or tail to it," says Tallow.

And that's what Wicksville in general decided—that they couldn't make head nor tail to it. It gave everybody in town something to talk about and figure over.

When the Man With the Black Gloves came to town and Henry Wigglesworth's will was found, folks puzzled more than ever.

But we boys had other fish to fry—except Mark. I guess he had the Wigglesworth mystery more in his mind than he did the Wicksville *Trumpet*. But after the next morn-

ing he had to think more about the *Trumpet*, for Lawyer Jones bid it in for us at the sheriff's sale of three hundred and thirty-two dollars—and Mark Tidd was a real, live, untamed editor.

CHAPTER II

MR. TIDD went along with us when we took possession of the Wicksville *Trumpet*. He headed straight for the room where the machinery was, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* sticking out of his pocket. Which one interested him first would have him for the morning—so Mark began to talk printing-press right off. Mr. Tidd went and looked it over and sniffed in a gentle, mild-mannered sort of way.

It *wasn't* much of a press, I expect. You worked it with a big crank, like turning a coffee-grinder. We boys had seen it done lots of times, for we'd hung around the printing-office more or less, and sometimes we'd helped fold papers and such things. So we had *some* experience. Some was about all we had, though. We knew as much about running a newspaper as a man that's picked a sliver out of his finger knows about surgery.

Mr. Tidd shucked off his coat and started prodding around in the insides of the press.

Mark motioned to us and we sneaked out into the office.

"Now," says Mark, "we c-c-commence. I'm editor and you f-fellows are everything else."

"What else is there?" says I. "I want to pick out a good job."

"You can be assistant b-business manager," says Mark.

"Assistant?" says I. "Who's the real thing?"

"Me," says Mark.

"Huh!" says I.

"You're a reporter, too," says he. "You and Plunk and T-Tallow."

"What's my job?" says Tallow.

"You're a-a-assistant foreman of the press-room," says Mark.

"Huh! Who's foreman?"

"Me," says Mark.

"What job have you got that I can be assistant to?" says Plunk.

"You're assistant circulation manager," says he.

"All we got to do is be those things you've said, and reporters besides?" says I.

"That, and hustle for ads., and help run the press, and fold papers, and learn to set type, and clean up, and help l-l-lick folks that come in to l-lick the editor, and run the job press, and

collect money, and get subscribers, and d-d-drum up printin' jobs. When you hain't got anythin' else to d-do, you can be l-lookin' for news."

"Too much loafin' about this to suit me," says Tallow.

"Say," says Plunk, "how *does* a newspaper make money, anyhow?"

"It d-don't," says Mark. "Anyhow old Rogers always said so; but it t-tries to make money by gettin' folks to subscribe, and by havin' f-folks advertise, and by doin' printin' jobs—like tickets for the Congregational Young Ladies' Auxiliary Annual Chicken-Pie Supper."

"How many subscribers did the *Trumpet* have when it busted?" says I.

"Hunderd and t-twenty-six," says Mark. "And listen to this, you f-fellows, we've got to have a thousand."

"Huh!" says I. "You'll have to git a few dozen fam'lies to move in first."

"Yes," says Plunk, "and about that type-settin'—who's goin' to teach it to us?"

Mark scratched his head at that. Who *was* going to teach us how to do it? But that was a worry that didn't last long. We found a bridge to cross that difficulty and the name of it was Tecumseh Androcles Spat. He came in through the door that very minute.

He looked like Abraham Lincoln in his shirt-sleeves. Tall he was, and bony, and he hadn't any coat on, and he did have one of those old flat-brimmed silk hats.

He looked at us a moment and then says·

"Do I find myself standing in the editorial sanctum of one of those bulwarks of liberty and free speech—the local newspaper?"

"Right on the edge of it," says Mark.

"Where then, may I ask, is that great and good man, the editor?"

Mark sort of puffed out his chest and looked important.

"I am the editor," says he.

The tall man looked sort of taken back, but just the same he took off his hat with a sweep.

"I greet you sir," he said. "You see before you no less a person than Tecumseh Androcles Spat. From my earliest youth the smell of printer's ink has been in my nose. My services have been sought, obtained, and finally dispensed with in no less than one hundred and seventy-four printing establishments. I desire to round out the number and make it a full century and three-quarters. Therefore, I apply to you for employment."

"Can you set type?" says Mark, beginning to look cheerful.

"Stick type? Can Tecumseh Androcles Spat stick type? My young friend, my first tooth was cut on a quoin; I learned my letters at the case; at the immature age of seven—an infant prodigy, with all modesty I say it—I could set the most complicated display. To-day, in my maturity, you perceive me unrivaled in my profession. I am the Compleat Printer."

"You can have a j-job," says Mark, "but I dunno if you'll ever get your wages."

"No matter, no matter. I am accustomed to that. Give me but a corner to slumber in, food for my stomach, tobacco for my pipe, and my soul is at peace."

"You're hired," says Mark.

"Where's your coat?" says I.

"In useful service, my young friend. It hangs from crossed sticks in the midst of a garden patch a mile or more away. It was a lovely garden patch wherein grew peas, string-beans, luscious cabbages, fragrant onions. But it was being destroyed. The birds of the air descended upon it in thousands. I looked, I comprehended. What a pity, said I. So, to avert further depredations, I stripped my coat, hung it from crossed sticks, and stood it in the midst of the garden patch. The garden needed it worse than I. Each time I gaze upon my uncoated arms I say

to myself, 'Tecumseh Androcles Spat is doing his part to preserve the nation's food.' "

"He talks like he was a lot educated," says Plunk.

Tecumseh Androcles overheard him. "Educated. Ah, indeed. Have I not in my day set type for every page of Goober's Grammar, Mills's Spelling Book, to say nothing of histories, philosophies, dictionaries. But most important of all, almanacs. Young gentlemen, I have set no less than ten almanacs from beginning to end. What university, I ask you, can equip you with the facts contained in a family almanac?"

"You'll n-n-need all you know around here," Mark says, with a grin. "We just bought this p-paper at sheriff's sale, and we've got the whole business to learn."

"Good! Splendid! You're in luck. Tecumseh Androcles Spat is the man to teach you. Where'll I begin?"

"You might go out in the shop and l-look around. Sort of get the lay of the land," says Mark.

He hung his silk hat on a hook and, in the most pompous, dignified way you ever saw, he stalked out into the press-room.

"Now for b-business," says Mark. "First thing 's to get some s-subscribers. Folks 'll

take the *Trumpet* if they know it's goin' to amount to s-somethin'. We've got to tell 'em."

"How?" says I.

"By talkin' it, singin' it, w-whistlin' it and p-playin' it on your mouth-organ," says Mark, with a grin. "Also by printin' it. We'll get out some hand-bills—and some bigger bills to stick on fences and things. I'll get up the bills. While I'm doin' it you fellows go out and see what you can l-learn from Tecumseh Androcles."

So Mark sat down to his desk and got a pencil and commenced scratching his head. The rest of us went out into the other room—and there was Mr. Tidd and Tecumseh Androcles in a regular old argument. Both of them had forgot all about working.

"'Tain't so," Mr. Tidd said, as loud and excited as he was capable of. "There hain't no book got more solid and useful knowledge in it than Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.* It's better 'n the whole kit and bundle of the rest of the books in the nation."

"My friend," said Tecumseh, "your view is narrow, not to say biased. I have read the volumes you praise. Without doubt there is merit in them. Oh, without doubt. But as compared to that marvelous book, Izaak

Walton's *Compleat Angler*, it is the flickering of a match to the shining of the noonday sun."

"*Angler*," says Mr. Tidd, disgusted as could be.

"Yes, *Angler*," says Tecumseh.

"Huh!" says Mr. Tidd.

"Do not snort at Izaak Walton," roared Tecumseh. "I will not stand by to see it done."

"Then don't go belittlin' Gibbon," says Mr. Tidd.

"Have you read *The Compleat Angler?*" shouted Tecumseh.

"No," says Mr. Tidd, more warlike than I thought he had it in him to be, "nor I hain't read the Compleat Fly-catcher, nor the Compleat Cold-catcher, nor—"

"Sir!" yelled Tecumseh, reaching as if to take off his coat and finding it was off. It sort of surprised him, I guess, but he got over it and shook his fist under Mr. Tidd's nose. He quit talking educated and careful, too—just for that minute.

"Your Gibbon wasn't nothin' but a flea on Walton's collar," says he.

It looked like there was going to be a regular rumpus, so I sort of stepped up and says:

"How's the printin'-press gettin' along, Mr. Tidd?"

"Eh?" says he. "Printin'-press. What printin'-press?"

"This one," says I.

"Um!" says he, rubbing his chin. "Calc'late I plum' forgot it. What's matter with it, Binney?"

"You was goin' to find out," says I.

"So I was. . . . So I was," says he.

"And you," says I to Tecumseh Androcles, "you quit botherin' him. He's busy. See if it hain't catchin'."

Well, sir, you should have seen Tecumseh go to work. He could work, too, and knew just what he was doing. He set every one of us doing something, and it didn't seem like ten minutes, though it must have been an hour or so, when Mark came out with some paper in his hand.

"Here's the hand-bill," says he. "Tecumseh Androcles, can you s-s-set this up so's it 'll look strikin'?"

"Give it to me, young man, and you shall see. Ah, you shall see."

So Tecumseh went to work and in no time had the thing set up. He fixed it so it would go on the job press and then we began printing it. Just let me tell you it was a jim-dandy. This is how it went:

MARK TIDD, EDITOR

THE WICKSVILLE "TRUMPET"
IS GOING TO TOOT

New Editor, New Management
New Policy, New Everything

First Toot Thursday

Mark Tidd and Company will
give this town a paper that will
make the State jealous.

$1.25 a Year

If there's anything you want
to know, look in the "Trumpet"
for it. It 'll be there.

Don't crowd, don't push. But
hand in your subscription early.
If you miss the first toot you'll
never forgive yourself.

SUBSCRIBE SUBSCRIBE SUBSCRIBE

By that time it was noon. Tecumseh was the first one to notice it.

"It is my custom," said he, "to eat at this time. As I understand it you are to supply me with nourishment."

"That was the b-bargain," says Mark. "Come on."

He went out with Tecumseh, and the rest of us followed. We knew he didn't have any money to buy a meal with, because he'd spent his last cent the day before, and we wondered

what he was up to. He went straight to the Acme Restaurant.

"Where's the boss?" he says to the girl at the counter

"Kitchen," says she.

"Call him out," says he.

"Call him yourself," says she. "Your voice is as strong as mine."

So Mark yelled, and in a minute out came Mr. Schmidt, waddling like an old duck.

"Vat iss?" says he.

"I want to b-board this gentleman here," says Mark, pointing to Tecumseh.

"Yass," says Mr. Schmidt.

"But I hain't got any m-money."

"Den you don't got any board," says Mr. Schmidt.

"But I've g-got a business p-proposition to make you."

"Make it quick, cakes iss in dat stove," says Mr. Schmidt.

"We own the newspaper," says Mark. "It's going to be the g-greatest newspaper in the State. Everybody's goin' to read it. *You're* goin' to r-r-read it. Now, I want to make money for you."

"Why?" says Mr. Schmidt.

"Because," says Mark, "I like the way your

cakes smell," and then he went ahead quick, telling the old fellow how much more money he would make if he advertised in the *Trumpet* and told folks about his pies and his meats, and what he was going to serve for meals. Once or twice Mr. Schmidt tried to interrupt, but Mark never gave him a chance. He ended up: "Now, Mr. Schmidt, you board Tecumseh Androcles and give him three good meals a day, and we'll advertise your place so every f-f-farmer that comes to town will want to eat here. I'll write the ads. m-myself. I wouldn't do that for everybody. We'll give you a full column every w-w-week."

"I don't—" began Mr. Schmidt, but Mark was at him again, and pretty soon Mr. Schmidt waved his hands in the air and says: "Stop. Vill you stop? Eh? Cakes I haff in dat oven. Dey schpoil. I advertise. Sure. I do anyt'ing if you go away. T'ree meal a day. You advertise a column in your paper. Iss dat it?"

"Yes," says Mark, and waved Tecumseh to a seat at a table. "Be sure you eat a c-c-column's worth every week," says he, and grinned at us.

That was our first stroke of business. I guess it was a good bargain. Once I saw Tecumseh eating, and I guess we didn't get much the worst

of it. No, I guess Mark Tidd didn't get beaten very bad on that bargain.

We went outside and started for home. At the corner we nearly bumped into a stranger. He was a small man, with the blackest eyes you ever saw, and he scowled at us as if we hadn't any right to be alive. One funny thing about him was that he had on black kid gloves.

"I don't l-like that man's looks," says Mark, turning to stare after him. "Wouldn't trust him with a red-hot stove, 'cause maybe his hands would be made of asbestos."

"Did look mean," says I. "Wonder who he was?"

"Dunno," says Mark, "and don't want to."

But he was mistaken about that. Before long Mark Tidd did want to know who he was, and wanted to know it worse than he had ever wanted to know anything in his life.

And that's how we saw the Man With the Black Gloves for the first time.

CHAPTER III

"THE t-trouble with this business," says Mark, when we were back in the office, "is that we haven't m-much workin' capital."

"What's workin' capital?" Plunk wanted to know.

"It's money you have to keep your b-business runnin'. Right now we have to buy ink and p-paper and things. We aren't t-takin' in enough money to do it, and to pay rent, and such like. All we've got is f-fifty dollars, and that's got to do. Ma says so. She says dad can t-throw away so much money, but not another cent; and if we can't make this p-paper pay on what we've got, why we can just up and b-bust."

"Um!" says I. "I guess we better get a wiggle on us, then."

"C-can't get many subscribers before the f-first paper comes out, but we'll print f-f-five hunderd of 'em, anyhow. Cost money, but we got to do it."

"How'll you get rid of 'em?" Tallow wanted to know.

"Sell 'em," says Mark, sharp-like. "We'll each take a bundle and sell 'em on the s-s-street like in the cities. Get more money out of 'em, too. Subscribers get f-f-fifty-two copies for a dollar and a quarter. We'll sell 'em for three cents—and folks 'll buy 'em, too. Won't come down with a year's subscription right off, but they'll dig up t-t-three cents just so's they can make fun of what we're doin'."

"Got to have some news for the paper," I says.

"Yes," says Mark. "We've got a start. There's the story about Henry Wigglesworth being dead, and about that boy. Probably the will will be r-r-read this week, too. But we've got to go after l-little things for p-p-personal items."

"How d'ye know when a thing's news?" says Plunk.

"Well," says Mark, "everything's news in Wicksville. But some things is better news than others, and we can write m-m-more about 'em. Now, s'pose Sam Wilkins hammers his finger with a h-hammer. Bein's it's nobody but Sam, we'd just write a little piece somethin' like this: 'Sam Wilkins up and banged his thumb with

a hammer, Thursday afternoon. The doctor says Sam 'll recover.'

"But if Sam's brother was one of the selectmen, we'd say: 'Samuel Wilkins, brother of our well-known and highly esteemed selectman, Hiram P. Wilkins, painfully injured himself Thursday while working on his brother's hen-coop. The selectman examined the injured thumb and gave it as his opinion that Samuel would be able to go to work again before the summer was over. Much regret has been expressed over the h-happening, because it delays the completion of the selectman's splendid new hen-house, which is one any village may be proud of.' See. T-that's the idee. If Sam's brother was President of the United States we'd write a whole column about it, and try to p-p-print a picture of the hurt t-thumb."

"I see," says I.

"Me, too," says the other fellows.

Just then Mr. Greening, of the Big Corner Store, came in.

"Howdy, boys!" says he.

"Howdy!" says we.

"In shape to print some hand-bills?"

"You b-bet," says Mark. "Reg'lar size?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Five hundred. How much?"

Right off, without so much as waiting to wink, Mark told him.

"All right. Can I have 'em to-morrow sure?"

"Yes, *sir*. G-gettin' out jobs on time is our s-s-specialty. Promptness and quality," says Mark, "is the watchword of this office."

"Fine. Do a good job on these and I'll have more for you every week."

"M-much obleeged," says Mark.

When Mr. Greening was gone I says to Mark: "How in the world did you know how much to charge him? Bet you got it wrong."

"You d-d-do, eh?" says Mark, with a twinkle in his little eyes. "Well, if I did, Binney, it hain't wrong on the losin' side for us. No, siree. I've b-been goin' over the books the last owner of this p-p-paper left here, to find out how much he charged for j-j-jobs, and what j-jobs was likely to come in. Mr. Greening's was one of 'em. So when he come I just charged him what the other feller would have charged—and added t-t-ten per cent. to make sure we wouldn't l-lose anything."

He looked proud and pleased with himself, like he always does when he does something that's pretty good. It *was* pretty good, too.

You've got to take off your hat to Mark when it comes to making money. He's a regular schemer, but for all that, he's fair. Nobody—at least no other kid in Wicksville—would have thought of getting at prices the way Mark did.

"The other owner of the p-p-paper didn't make money," says Mark. "That's why I added ten per cent. If we f-f-find that isn't enough, we'll add more—and we'll get it, too, 'cause we're goin' to turn out first-class work—and turn it out just when we p-p-promise to. Folks don't mind a few cents extry if they get quality and promptness."

Tecumseh Androcles Spat came in from the composing-room just then, shaking his head from side to side and looking as doleful as a gander on a rainy day.

"Mr. Editor," said he, "my talents are lying idle. It should not be so. At this moment I should be dazzling the inhabitants of this village with typographical displays such as their eyes have never feasted on. Yet no copy hangs on the hook."

"In just one s-s-second there'll be some hangin' there," said Mark, and he reached out and stuck the paper Mr. Greening had given him on the hook where stuff is put that the man in the composing-room is to set in type.

Tecumseh Androcles stared at it, cocked his head on one side, wrinkled his nose, and then began making funny motions in the air with one hand like he was drawing lines and making dots and flourishes.

"Good," says he in a minute. "The thing is done. Tecumseh Androcles Spat sees the completed hand-bill in his mind's eye—and it is beautiful."

"M-make it beautiful," says Mark, "but also make it quick!"

"Young sir," says Tecumseh, "no compositor between the broad Atlantic and the boundless Pacific can vie with me in speed. I shall show you."

And he dodged out into the composing-room so quickly his head seemed to snap like the snapper on the end of a horse-whip.

"I'm afraid," says Mark, "that Tecumseh's bothered with what some folks call artistic t-t-temperament. I don't know what it is, exactly, but it's hard to m-manage."

"You'll manage it, all right," says Tallow. "I'll bet you could drive two artistic temperaments in a team."

"I'd hate to try," says Mark, but you could see he was tickled. He always likes to be appreciated—and so do the rest of us, I guess.

"Now," says he, "Plunk and Tallow, scatter and hunt up news. Don't miss anythin'. F-f-fetch in everything you get to hear, and we'll use all we can that's really n-news. Now git—and don't loaf."

"Huh!" says Plunk. "Guess we hain't any more apt to loaf than *you* are."

"Reporters always try to loaf," says Mark. "I read it in a book."

Then Mark says to me that he shouldn't be surprised if it would be a good idea for me to go to the hotel and find out who was registered there, and what they came to town for, and how long they were going to stay.

"And," says he, "if there's any of t-t-them that sounds like he might be int'restin', get a talk with him and write up what he says."

So off I went to the hotel.

"Gimme a look at the register," says I to Billy Green, the clerk.

"What d'you want to look at the register for?" says Bill, winking at a traveling man that was standing close by.

"To see who's registered," says I. "Did you think I wanted to read a poem out of it?"

Bill laughed and pulled the book away.

"No kids allowed," says he. "I'll bet your hands are dirty and you'd muss it all up."

"Bill," says I, "you better quit makin' fun of me, or I'll put a piece in the paper about how you got on the dining-car last week, and didn't know what finger-bowls was, and drank the water out of your'n, thinkin' it was lemonade 'cause it had lemon peelin' in it."

Bill he got pretty red and looked sideways at the traveling man and tried to laugh it off. But it was so, and I knew it. He didn't know how I knew it, and I wasn't going to tell him.

"Do I get to see the register?" says I.

"What you got to do with the newspaper?" he wanted to know.

"Mark Tidd and Plunk and Tallow and me is runnin' it," says I, "and I'm after news."

"Guess I'll have to let you see it, then," says he, and he pushed it over.

There was five men registered fresh that morning. Three of them I knew, for they were traveling men that came to town every week. One of the others was just a man from Freesoil that didn't amount to much, though I wrote a line mentioning that he was in town. The other fellow I'd never heard of.

"Who's this Silas Spragg?" says I.

"Dunno," says Billy. "He hain't stated his business."

"Guess I'll interview him, then," says I. "Maybe there's some news in him. Where's he hidin' away?"

"That's him on the sidewalk, there," says Bill, and he pointed to a man about thirty years old who was leaning against a hitching-post in front and looking at the town like he didn't think much of it.

"Much obliged," says I, and went out to see Mr. Spragg.

"Good mornin'," says I. "Is this Mr. Silas Spragg?"

"Yes," says he, sharp-like. "What of it?"

I figured maybe his breakfast hadn't agreed with him, or that his shoes was too tight, or something.

"I just saw your name on the register," says I, "and, bein' as I represent the newspaper, I figgered I'd better get acquainted with you. Ever been here before?"

"No," says he. "If I had 'a' been I wouldn't have come back this time."

"Goin' to stay long?" I asked.

He sort of grinned. "Reg'lar newspaper man, hain't you?" says he. "Run one of them amateur newspapers?"

"No," says I, "professional. Reg'lar paper printed on a printin'-press, with advertisin' in

it, issued every Thursday, a dollar and a quarter a year."

"Huh!" says he. "What paper's that?"

"The Wicksville *Trumpet*," says I.

He laughed. "That's busted," says he. "Sheriff took it for debts. You can't fool me, sonny."

"Yes," says I, "it was sold by the sheriff and Mark Tidd's dad bought it for us four fellers to run. It hain't busted any more, and, mister, it hain't goin' to be busted, either. Guess you don't know Mark Tidd, do you?"

"No," says he, "but I hope he didn't spend much money for his paper."

"Why?" says I.

" 'Cause he's goin' to lose it," says he.

"Maybe," says I, "he'll have somethin' to say about that."

"So'll I," says he, "and here's some news for you. You'll like to print it, I'll bet. I'm a newspaper man myself. Part owner of the Eagle Center *Clarion*. When we heard the *Trumpet* was busted we decided to grab on to this town and get out a special edition of the *Clarion* for it. See? One plant to print two papers. I'm here to be editor of the Wicksville edition. . . . Now what d'you think about bustin', eh? Figger there's room for two papers here?"

"No," says I; "so you'd better take the noon train back to Eagle Center."

He laughed, disagreeable-like. "Not me," says he. "The *Clarion* 'll *own* this town in two months. We'll give 'em a real paper that folks 'll buy and depend on. You might as well shut up shop right off and save expense. Maybe we'd go so far as to give you a few dollars for the junk up at your office."

"Huh!" says I. "If you're lookin' for a row, I guess we can pervide it for you. And we'll start right off. Sorry I hain't got time to talk to you any more, but I've got somethin' to do. Yes, Mister Spragg, I'm movin' on now, and in ten minutes the Eagle Center *Clarion* 'll be startin' in to wish it hadn't ever tried to hog the whole State. Good-by, mister. Better leave while you've got change enough left to pay your fare."

He said something to me that sounded like he was real mad, and I moved off considerable rapid, because I didn't know but what he'd take it into his head to get rough. Yes, I went away from there prompt, and hurried to the office. Mark was sitting at his desk, editing.

"Hey, Mark," says I, "we're up against it again. Seems like we're always runnin' up against it. Folks won't let us have peace."

"N-n-now what?" says he.

"Eagle Center *Clarion's* goin' to print a special Wicksville edition," says I. "They've got an editor here, and he says he's goin' to put us out of business."

"Um!" says Mark, and turned around so his face was toward the window. "S-s-special edition, eh?" Then he began tugging at his ear like he always does when there's a problem to figure out or some sort of difficult thing to overcome. "Well," says he in a minute, "I don't see how we can s-s-stop 'em. But we'll let 'em know they've got competition, eh, Binney?"

"You bet," says I.

"Got to m-m-make our first paper a hummer," says he, "so folks 'll talk about it and wonder what the dickens we'll p-p-print *next* week."

"Fine," says I. "How'll we get about it."

"Best way," says he, "is to take a chance of gettin' licked."

"Sounds good," says I.

"We'll p-p-print some *real* news," says he, "and we'll have a c-c-couple of typographical errors that h-happen on purpose."

"Dunno what they be," says I, "but they sound int'restin'."

"They will be," says he. "I'll m-m-make 'em myself."

"Kind of discouragin' to have another paper crowdin' in here right at the start," says I.

"Shucks!" says he. "Just m-m-makes more work and more f-f-figgerin'. 'Tain't any fun to do a thing that's *easy*. Anybody can do an easy thing. Where the fun comes in is havin' to *f-f-fight* for it."

"Maybe," says I, "but that's where the worry comes, too."

"Keep so b-busy you won't have time to worry," says he, "and first l-let's go find your Mister Spragg."

"Come on," says I, and off we went to the hotel.

Mr. Spragg was still leaning against the same hitching-post. If he wasn't going to do anything but hold up a post, I thought to myself, maybe we won't have such a hard time of it, after all.

"Mister Spragg," says I, "let me introduce the editor of the Wicksville *Trumpet*."

"Him?" says Mr. Spragg, staring at Mark.

"Him," says I.

Then Mr. Spragg did something he hadn't ought to have done—not if he was wise. He busted right out laughing in Mark's face.

"Him the editor!" says Mr. Spragg. "Oh, my goodness! Thought I was up against some

kind of a man, but nothin' but an over-fed kid that's so fat he can't hardly waddle. Oh! Oh!"

I kept my eyes on Mark, but he didn't turn a hair. You would have thought he didn't even hear what Spragg said, for he just waited for the man to get through laughing, and then he said, quiet-like:

"Glad to meet you, Mister S-s-spragg."

"Go along, fatty," says Spragg, "and don't bother me."

"I d-d-don't want to bother you unless I *have* to," says Mark, as calm and quiet as a china nest egg. "I figgered maybe you'd like to t-t-talk things over a bit."

"With *you?*" says Spragg, as scornful as anything. "No time to bother with kids."

"All right," says Mark, still polite as peas. "I j-just wanted to give you the chance, that was all. I don't b'lieve in sailin' into a f-feller till there's some reason for it, and if there's a chance to be f-friends and keep out hard feelin', I'm the one to do all I can."

"Don't be scairt of me, sonny. I hain't goin' to hurt you any—that is, outside of bustin' up that paper you're playin' with."

"Oh," says Mark, "you're aimin' to do that, eh? I didn't have any right to complain when

you came in here with your p-p-paper. You had a right to if you wanted to. And you had a r-r-right to take away my subscribers and advertisers if you could get 'em—by fair, b-b-business-like means. But you didn't have a right to come in here d-d-deliberately intendin' to bust up our business. That hain't fair or honest."

He stopped and looked Mr. Spragg over from head to toes.

"Come to t-think of it," says he, "I don't b'lieve I like your l-looks. You look like a bluffer to me, and your eyes are too close t-together for folks to be warranted in t-trustin' you far. So I sha'n't. . . . That's about all. I wanted to be d-d-decent about it, but I guess that hain't your way of doin'. So I'll issue a little warnin'. Go as far as you kin to get business. Go after my business as hard as you can m-m-manage—but do it fair and aboveboard and the way d-decent business men do. As l-long as you stick to the rules there won't be any trouble. But the f-first time I catch you t-t-tryin' to do anythin' underhand or shysterin' you'll think you sat down unexpected on to a nest of yaller-jackets. Jest f-f-fix that in your mind, Mister Spragg. . . . Good-by."

For a minute Spragg stood looking at Mark

bug-eyed. He was 'most strangled with astonishment, I guess. We turned and walked off, and we'd gone fifty feet before he came to himself enough to say a word. Then he yelled:

"Hey, come back here! Hey, you! What you mean talkin' like that?" And he started after us. But just then Billy Green, the hotel clerk, came out.

"What's matter?" says he, and then he saw Mark and me. "Hain't been goin' up against Mark Tidd, have you?" says he to Spragg.

"That fat kid was sassin' me," says he.

"Thank your stars," says Billy, "that's all he done to you. Take my advice and forgit it."

Mark didn't miss a word of it, and I could see his ears getting pink with pleasure. He wasn't swell-headed, and I guess I've said so before, but he did like to hear nice things said about himself, and more than anything else he liked to know that folks figured he wasn't the sort you could take advantage of. Mark was different from most fellows. He'd rather have the sharpest brain in town than to win the most events in the Olympic Games. And you could tickle him more by praising something he'd *thought up* than by praising something he'd just *done*.

Mark didn't say anything while we walked a

couple of blocks, but a man with one eye, and that one under a patch, could have seen he was studying and studying.

"Well," says I, "what's the word?"

"Wisht he hadn't showed up so s-s-soon," says Mark, "I was perty busy before. I wanted t-t-time to think and study on somethin' else for a while. Now I'll have to think and s-s-study about how to stop Spragg from gettin' the best of us, and how to get the b-best of him. Only we've got to be *fair*."

"Sure," says I, "but what else did you want to figger on?"

"The Wigglesworth business," says he. "I wanted to p-p-puzzle out what's goin' on, and I wanted to s-sneak out and see that boy and t-talk to him. I bet he knows things Lawyer Jones didn't get out of him. Boys don't always tell men all they know. . . . Well, I'll just have to f-f-find time to do both."

"We'll help all we can," says I. "Maybe we'll be *some* good."

"Now don't go gettin' sore," says Mark. "I hain't ever slighted you yet, have I? Eh? When anythin' was g-goin' on you got plenty to do, didn't you?"

"Yes," says I.

"Well," says he, "more l-likely you'll get

more 'n you want to do this time. . . . I do wisht I could figger out where that boy comes in. Rock's his name. What's he got to do with Henry Wigglesworth? Why didn't Mr. Wigglesworth speak to him at all? Remember Lawyer Jones said he didn't. Then what m-m-made Mr. Wigglesworth come s-sneakin' in at night to look at him? That's the hardest of all. He could see the b-boy all day. What for did he want to be p-p-prowlin' in with a lamp to look at him at night? It's all mixed up. But you can bet there's s-somethin' behind it all that 'll m-make a dandy newspaper story when we get to the b-b-bottom of it."

"Maybe we won't," says I.

He turned on me quick. "We will," says he, "or bust."

"Huh!" says I. "We can't always come out on top."

"We can always if we t-t-try hard enough. The reason some folks is always f-f-failin' is because they don't think hard enough and work hard enough. Laziness makes more f-f-failures than bad luck."

"Maybe," says I, "but this looks like it was too tough a job for just kids."

"Wait and see," says he.

"I'll help you," says I.

Lots of fellows would have told me to mind my own business, or maybe laughed at me and said I wasn't smart enough to help, but not Mark.

"All right," says he, "two heads is b-better than a sack of meal. What I m-miss you may see, and what you don't catch on to may stick out plain to me. Let's get at it."

CHAPTER IV

THE first thing that happened was the coming of the Man With the Black Gloves. All of a sudden we looked up and there he was standing in the door, squinting at us with his disagreeable eyes. You haven't any idea how quiet he'd come. One second he wasn't there; the next second there he was, and no fuss about it at all.

"Howdy!" says Mark.

"Proprietor in?" says the man, chopping off his words like he hated to use them at all.

"I'm one of t-them," says Mark. "What can I do for you?"

"Liner ad. How much?" He didn't throw in one extra word for good measure. After he was gone Mark says he bet he was stingy as anything. He said he guessed so because he hated to give away the cheapest thing in the world—which is talk.

"Cent a word," says Mark.

The Man With the Black Gloves poked out a

paper to Mark and says, "Head it 'Personal.'" Then he passed over a quarter and Mark counted the words and gave back the change. The man turned and went out as quiet as he came, not even nodding good-by.

Mark stood looking after him, and when he was out of ear-shot he turned to me and said almost in a whisper, "Binney, l-l-look here!"

Something in his voice made me come quick. I took the paper out of his hand and read what was written on it. It said:

JETHRO: On deck. Report. Center Line Bridge. Eight. G. G. G.

"Funny kind of an ad.," says I.

"F-f-funny kind of a man," says Mark. "What d'you make of it?"

"Nothin'," says I.

"He's up to somethin'," says Mark.

"Huh!" says I. "Haven't we got work enough and mysteries enough on hand without goin' out of our way to find another?"

"But," says Mark, "this is *s-s-suspicious*."

"What of it?" says I.

"Looks to me," says he, "like it was our d-duty as newspaper men to l-l-look into it. May be for the good of the community."

"Rats!" says I.

"He hain't plannin' no good," says Mark.

"Likely he hain't," says I, "but what business is it of ours?"

"Everything is a newspaper man's b-business," says Mark, "even things that hain't none of his b-business."

"That sounds crazy," says I.

"Anyhow," says he, "I'm goin' to f-f-find out what's the meanin' of this ad."

"Go ahead," says I, "and if you get into trouble don't ask *me* to pull you out."

Mark looked at me and grinned, and I grinned back, for it *was* funny. Usually the one to get folks out of trouble wasn't me. I was better at getting them into it. But Mark, why, he made a sort of business of jerking us out of scrapes we got into!

"Why," says I, "would a man put in an ad. like that? Why doesn't he go tell this Jethro instead of puttin' it in the paper?"

"One reason," says Mark, "is because he d-d-don't want to be seen near where this Jethro is stayin'."

That did sound reasonable.

"Yes," says Mark, tugging at his ear. "Jethro's expectin' this feller. This Black Glove feller's the boss, it looks to me Jethro's either d-doin' somethin' or f-f-findin' out somethin' for Black Gloves, and this ad. tells him

to report. That's easy. He's to do his r-r-reportin' at the Center Line Bridge, and the 'eight' means eight o'clock. . . . But what d-day?"

"Why," says I, "the day the paper comes out!"

"N-no," says Mark. "I f-figger he means *next* day. By that time Jethro 'd have time to get his p-p-paper and see the ad. Most likely he's been told to look for his orders that way."

"To be sure," says I, and it did seem pretty clear after Mark reasoned it out, but I never would have got that far in six years of digging.

"So," says Mark, "you and me will be at Center Line Bridge Friday n-n-night an hour ahead of t-t-time, so's to hide away and overhear what's up."

"And probably git our backs busted," says I.

"Hain't n-never got 'em b-busted yet," says he.

"All right, Mark," I says. "Where you go I go, but one of these times neither one of us 'll be comin' back in one piece. No, sir, we'll be gettin' scattered all over the county so our folks 'll have to gather us up in a basket."

"B-b-between now and Friday," says Mark, changing the subject, "there's a n-newspaper to get out. Stop gabblin' and go to work."

Mark turned around to his desk and went to work. I stood around a minute and then, not seeing anything special to get at, I asked him what he wanted me to do.

"Go out and get some advertisin'," says he, and went to work again.

Get some advertising, says he! I had about as much idea how to get advertising as I had how to catch eels with my bare hands—and I found out that advertisements were just about as easy to catch as eels. Yes, and maybe a little harder. If you try to catch an eel, why, he just wriggles away, but if you try to catch an advertisement the man you try to catch it from is as likely as not to kick you out of his store. I don't see why ads. aren't catching, like measles or mumps. It would make it a heap easier for us newspaper men.

Anyhow, all the business I managed to get was a miserable little advertisement from old man Crane, who had started to grow whiskers and wanted to trade a safety razor for a brush and comb. It was a cent a word and there were fifteen words. I didn't see exactly how we were going to get rich at that rate.

While I was on my way back to the office I saw what looked like it was going to be a fight, so I stopped around to watch, but it turned out

to be nothing but a squabble. It was kind of fun, though, even if nobody did anything but talk and holler. The men mixed up in it were Mr. Pawl, who owned the Emporium Grocery, and Mr. Giddings, who ran the Busy Big Market.

When I got there they were just beginning to get started good. Mr. Pawl, who was about five feet and a half tall, was reaching up in the air as far as he could reach to shake his fist under Mr. Giddings's nose—and Mr. Giddings's nose was so high up he couldn't even come near it.

"You did," says he, hollering as loud as he could yell. "You know you did, you—you yaller grasshopper. She come right over and told me. 'Tain't the first time, neither. But it's goin' to be the last. No man kin say to Missis Petty that the eggs in my store was laid by a hen that was sufferin' from ague. No, sir, nobody kin. Sufferin' from ague, says you, so that the eggs was addled before they was laid, on account of the hen shakin' and shiverin' so. . . . That's what you told her, you wabblin' old bean-pole. Tryin' to drive away my customers, eh? I'll show you."

"Now, Banty," says Mr. Giddings, calling Mr. Pawl a name that always made him mad enough

to eat a barrel of nails, because he didn't like to have folks mention his size, "now, Banty, jest keep your feet on the ground. 'Tain't a mite worse for me to tell Missis Petty what I told her than it is for you to tell Missis Green that whenever you grease up your buggy you git a pound of my butter 'cause it's better for the purpose than the best axle grease—but hain't good for nothin' else. Remember that, don't you, you half-grown toadstool? . . . Jest let me tell you, this here slanderin' 's been goin' on long enough, and I'm a-goin' to fight back. I'll give you tit for tat, and don't you forgit it."

"I'll have the law on you," Mr. Pawl hollered.

"Law—shucks! I'll take you acrost my knee and spank you," says Giddings.

"I won't muss up my hands touchin' you," says Pawl. "'Twouldn't hurt you nohow, with your rhinoceros hide. Only way to git you sufferin' is to touch your pocket-book. From now I'm a-goin' after your business, and goin' after it hard. I'll *bust* you, that's what I'll do. I'll bust you so's you can't be put together with glue."

"Two kin play that fiddle," says Mr. Giddings. "In two months there won't be but one grocery

store in Wicksville, and that one 'll be Giddings's Busy Big Market. Now run along and sleep on that."

Giddings walked off, leaving Pawl dancing up and down and making noises that didn't have any sense to them. He was so mad he didn't know if he was a man in Wicksville or a rampaging hyena in the Desert of Sahara.

I poked along to the office with my little ad. and handed it to Mark, sort of figgerin' maybe he'd be mad because I hadn't got more, but he wasn't, and I might have known he wouldn't be.

"F-f-fine," says he. "That's a starter. I didn't really f-f-figger you'd get *any*, first time out. Bet you get to be the best advertisin'-getter in the office."

Maybe he didn't mean it, and maybe he was saying it just to make me feel good, but anyhow it was a good idea. If he'd growled and acted disappointed, most likely it would have taken the heart out of me, so that next time I'd have done worse. But as it was I felt, somehow, like I could go out and get a whole basketful of ads. now. That was Mark Tidd's way of doing things. He knew how to manage fellows and how to get the most work out of them. I'll bet you that some day he's one of the biggest

business men there is. I don't mean big just because he's such a whopper, but important.

I told him about the row between Pawl and Giddings, and he laughed till the fat on his cheeks wabbled like a dish of jelly. Then he got sober and began tugging his ear.

"Come on, Binney," says he.

"Where?" says I.

"Out to git some b-b-business," says he.

I went following along till he came to Pawl's Emporium and was turning in.

"Hey," says I, "what you goin' in here for? He's too mad to *sell* things, let alone buyin' advertisin' space."

"Maybe," says Mark. "Let's try, anyhow."

So in we went. Mr. Pawl was behind the counter, walking up and down like a wolf in a circus cage, and every little while he would up with his fist and bang it down with all his might. I guess he imagined he was smashing Giddings.

"Come on away from here," says I to Mark. "He may take it into his head to wallop us."

Mark just grinned.

"Howdy, Mr. Pawl!" says he.

Mr. Pawl just glared at him and banged the counter again.

"I don't b-b-blame you for being mad," says Mark. "I'd be madder 'n you are if it was me."

"If what was you?" says Mr. Pawl.

"If a competitor was t-tryin' to get ahead of me like yours is tryin' to get ahead of you."

"What's he doin' now? What's he doin' now?" Mr. Pawl yelled at the top of his voice.

"I'll tell you what I *think* he's goin' to d-d-do," says Mark. "He's goin' to go after your customers hard. He's goin' to offer 'em b-bargains, and maybe he'll have somethin' to say about *you*."

"What d'you mean? How'll he offer bargains? Where'll he say anythin' about me?"

"I *think*," says Mark, "he's goin' to p-p-put a big advertisement in the p-p-paper. If he does he'll tell f-f-folks about some whoppin' bargains. And I guess maybe he'll compare his store with yours, and his b-bargains with yours, and your stuff won't get p-praised much. D'you f-figger it will?"

"Advertise, will he? Thinks he can git ahead of me, does he? Go spatterin' printer's ink, eh? Well, he better not. I'll have the law on him, so I will. I'll make him wish his name wasn't Giddings 'fore I'm through with him."

"I know what I'd do if I was you," says Mark.

"What 'u'd *you* do?" growled Mr. Pawl.

"I'd b-b-beat him at his own game," says

Mark. "I wouldn't let on I f-f-figgered he was goin' to advertise, but I'd advertise myself, and wouldn't I offer b-bargains! I'll bet I'd put things in the paper that would start a reg'lar p-p-procession into this store. And if I could think of anythin' to say, I guess I'd sort of allude to competitors and their way of d-d-doin' business, and such."

"If I could think of anythin'!" yelled Mr. Pawl. "You bet I kin think of somethin'. How big a advertisement d'you figger he'll print?"

"Prob'ly all of half a p-page," says Mark.

"I'll have a page, a whole blinged page. I'll show him! That's the way we do business in the Emporium. No half-pages for us. We go the whole hog when we go. . . . Now git out of here, you kids. I'm goin' to be busy. I've got to rig up a whole-page ad. for that paper, and I got to do it quick to beat that rake-handle of a Giddings. . . . When's the paper come out?"

"To-morrow," says Mark. "Better get your ad. in this afternoon."

"You bet I will," says Mr. Pawl, and while we were going out he was already writing on it.

Mark looked at me and grinned. "F-f-funny he didn't kick us out," says he.

"Mark Tidd," says I, "I take off my hat.

Talk about grabbin' a opportunity when it's passin'! Well, I guess maybe you didn't grab this one."

"You lugged in the opportunity," says Mark, giving me credit like he always does, even though I didn't deserve much of it. "But we hain't quite through grabbin' yet," says he. "We got to see Mr. Giddings."

We went catercorner across the street to the Busy Big Market, and there was Mr. Giddings in the door, with a grin on his face, looking down at a crate of eggs. On the crate he had just stuck a sign, which read:

THESE EGGS WERE LAID BY HARDWORKING, HONEST HENS
THE OLDEST IS UNDER TWENTY-FOUR HOURS
BUY YOUR EGGS HERE — DON'T GO ELSEWHERE
OUR COMPETITORS' CHICKENS HAVE AGUE
THEIR EGGS ARE SCRAMBLED IN THE SHELL

Mark started in to laugh and nudged me with his elbow.

"Laugh, you chump," says he, "l-l-laugh."

So I set in to laughing with all my might. Mr. Giddings looked at us and grinned.

"Perty good, eh?" says he.

"You bet," says Mark, "but I hear tell Mr. Pawl's goin' to have even that sign beat."

"He is, is he?" says Mr. Giddings. "How is

he, I'd like to know? He better not start in on anythin'. What's the leetle weasel up to now?"

"Advertisin'," says Mark. "He's goin' to advertise such b-b-bargains as Wicksville 'ain't ever seen before. I got wind of somethin' else, too. I hear he's goin' to allude to his competitors in his advertisement, and sort of lambaste 'em and their goods."

"He is, eh? When? How?"

"To-morrow, in the Wicksville *Trumpet*," says Mark. "He's g-g-goin' to have a full-page ad., and I'll bet he'll say some mean things in it, too."

"Think so?" says Mr. Giddings, eager-like. "Well, now, I'll fool the little flea. That's what I'll do. I'll have a page ad., too, and if he can offer better bargains than I do, or say more cuttin' things, then I'll go out of business. Paper comes out to-morrow, don't it?"

"Yes," says Mark. "Better have your page in the office this afternoon. It 'll have to be set up in a hurry."

"You bet I will," says Mr. Giddings, "and I'll say things in it so hot your compositor 'll burn his fingers settin' 'em in type."

We went hustling back to the office and told Tecumseh Androcles Spat that he had a night's

work ahead of him that would come close to taxing even his ability.

"What is it?" says he.

"Two page ads.," says Mark.

"Huh!" says Tecumseh Androcles. "I'll have them ready. And they will not be mere ads. They will be works of art. I will bring to the setting of them all my skill and knowledge, to say nothing of the genius with which nature has endowed me. Young sirs, this town will see two page ads. such as it has never dreamed of."

"Fine," says Mark, and we went back into the office.

"I'll bet," says Mark, "that Tecumseh Androcles was right about one t-t-thing. Wicksville hain't ever dreamed of two page advertisements like those 'll be."

"I only hope," says I, "that there won't be no bloodshed."

Mark grinned, happy-like. "Business is p-p-pickin' up. Wonder how many page advertisements Spragg has p-p-picked up for the Eagle Center *Clarion?*"

CHAPTER V

NEXT day what Mark Tidd called the *mended* Wicksville *Trumpet* gave its first toot. It didn't break our backs carrying to the post-office the copies we mailed to regular subscribers. The four of us boys could 'most have written out enough papers longhand to fix *them* up, but we did print five hundred copies altogether. The rest we were going to sell just like papers are sold in cities.

We sold them for three cents apiece, and every fellow had subscription blanks in his pocket so if anybody got so reckless as to want to subscribe we could catch him before he cooled off. You wouldn't believe it, but before night we had raked in forty-six regular honest-to-goodness subscribers.

Folks was that interested! At first they bought our papers to see the joke, I guess, but pretty soon they were buying them because they wanted to read what was in them, and especial to read about Henry Wigglesworth

and the two page advertisements from Pawl and Giddings.

The Eagle Center *Clarion* was on deck, too, giving away sample copies of the new Wicksville edition. But we had Spragg swamped. For every local he had we printed three, and three of the kind Wicksville folks like to read. He had only a dozen lines about Henry Wigglesworth, while we had two columns full of interesting things, and mystery, and Rock, and such like. It was the first time folks really got any clear idea of what had happened out there. At that, I guess they thought they had a clearer idea than they had. I know we editors would have given considerable to be better posted.

Ten minutes after he got his paper Mr. Pawl started out to lick Mr. Giddings. About that same minute Mr. Giddings started out to do things to Mr. Pawl, and they met in the square close to the town pump. Each of them had a *Trumpet* clutched in his fingers, and was waving it around like a battle flag. When they saw each other they both let out a bellow and rushed.

But neither of them was so war-like, when it came to doing regular fighting, as they were when nothing but yelling was necessary. When they got about eight feet apart they both stepped like somebody was standing up and hauling on

the lines. They stopped so sudden it must have jarred them, and there they stood, shaking their fists at each other and waving their *Trumpets*.

Uncle Ike Bond, the 'bus driver, drew up his horses and craned his neck to listen.

"What's trouble?" he called down.

"They're squabblin' about them advertisements," said Jim Walker.

"Um! . . . If I was them fellers I'd keep shet up about them ads. As I view it there was consid'able truth about both of 'em. Giddings he lets on Pawl is a skinflint and weighs his hand with every pound of butter; Pawl he gives it out that Giddings hain't got but one honest hair in his head, and that one's so loose at the root it's clost to fallin' out. I've dealt consid'able with both," Uncle Ike went on, waggling his head, "and as I view it nobody hain't been wronged." He stopped a minute and squinted down at them.

"Be you honest figgerin' on a fight?" he asked, "'cause if you be I'll stop to watch, but if it hain't nothin' but a fist-shakin' match I'll move along. Hey?"

Both men looked sort of sheepish, and like they wished they was where they weren't.

"Go on, Pawl," said Uncle Ike, "step up and lam him one."

Pawl backed off like the place he was standing was too hot for his feet.

"Um!" says Uncle Ike. "Well, *you* start it, Giddings. Somebody put a chip on Pawl's shoulder. Giddings 'll knock it off."

"I won't have no chip on my shoulder," says Pawl.

"I see somebody goin' into my store," says Giddings. "I got to hurry over there."

"Both of you better hurry back," says Uncle Ike. "I'm what you might call a man with experience and wisdom. For more years 'n I like to think about I've been a-drivin' this 'bus, and the seat of a 'bus is the place to git experience. Nothin' like it. Greatest teacher in the world. I calc'late there's few things I hain't capable of discussin' if I was asked. I'm capable of offerin' both of you belligerents advice right here and now, and this is it: You go on back to your stores and tend to business, which don't mean puttin' sand in the sugar, or sellin' cold-storage eggs with a yarn that the hen is still cacklin' that laid 'em. Jest try bein' square with your customers, and with each other, if you kin go so far, and you won't git made sich an idiotic spectacle of as you be now. Nobody's profited by this here rumpus but Mark Tidd. Advertisin'! Huh! Now run along, you fellers, and

advertise all over again, but advertise yourselves, and advertise honest. Try it once, and see if you don't git a substantial profit out of it. Jest tell the plain truth in Mark's paper, and stick to what you advertise. Bein' as you're who you are, 'tain't reasonable to expect wonders of you, but you can give a sort of flickerin' imitation of business men. . . . G'dap, hosses. Mooch along there." And Uncle Ike rattled off up the street, contented with himself and almost tickled to death that he'd got a chance to jaw somebody.

As for us fellows, we went to selling papers as hard as we could, and would you believe it, before noon we were cleaned out. Yes, sir, we'd sold every single solitary one.

"Don't get s-s-set up," says Mark. "Tain't goin' to be as easy all the t-t-time. Folks is buyin' to-day out of curiosity. Next week we'll have harder sleddin'."

"Bet we don't," says Plunk. "Bet it 'll be easier to run this old paper than it is to slide down-hill. I don't see anythin' hard about it."

"Huh!" says Mark, and not another word.

Mark and I walked past the hotel, and there stood Spragg. He scowled at us over the top of one of our papers that he had paid three real cents for.

WE WENT TO SELLING PAPERS AS HARD AS WE COULD, AND BEFORE NOON WE WERE CLEANED OUT

"Well," says I, "what do you think of it?"

"Kid paper," says he.

"Those page ads. are k-k-kid ads., ain't they?" says Mark.

"Luck," says Spragg. "I'll have 'em next week."

"Wigglesworth story was a kid story?" says Mark.

"Nothin' to it," says Spragg. "I've asked folks. I'm a newspaper man, and if there was a story I'd get it. It wouldn't be you young ones."

"You g-go on thinkin' so," says Mark. "We couldn't ask anythin' b-better."

We went on, and when we were out of earshot Mark says: "That reminds me, I want to go up to Lawyer Jones. I w-w-want to know about Mr. Wigglesworth's w-w-will. Folks 'll want to know in the next *Trumpet*, t-too."

"All right," says I. "I don't mind sayin' I'm a mite curious, myself."

So up we went.

"Ah," says Lawyer Jones, "what can I do for you, my young friends? Are you—ah—representing the press to-day?"

"Y-yes," says Mark. "We came to find out if there was anything new to the Wigglesworth

b-business. Or if you'd tell us about the w-w-will."

"Nothing new," says Lawyer Jones. "I can't find out a thing about that boy, and he can't tell me anything that will throw the least light on why he was in Henry Wigglesworth's house. Seems he's been kept alone most of his life—without folks, anyhow. Pretty well looked after, I guess, though. Been to one boarding-school after another ever since he can remember—cheap ones. Didn't know who paid his bills. Lonely little customer. Not a soul in the world ever stood to him in the position of father or guardian."

"Interestin'," says Mark. "Who's stayin' there with the boy?"

"Mr. Wigglesworth's man-of-all-work. Jethro's his name."

"*What?*" says Mark in a tone that made me jump.

"Jethro," repeated Mr. Jones, sort of surprised. "Why?"

"Oh, nothin'," says Mark. "Kind of a f-f-funny name."

"About the will," says Mr. Jones, "I guess there's nothing to prevent me from reading it to you. It's sort of queer, like everything else that has happened since Mr.

Wigglesworth died. I don't know just what to do."

"Will it d-d-do any harm if we p-print it?" says Mark

Mr. Jones hesitated a moment, like lawyers always do, just for effect, I guess, then he said, "Wa-al, I dunno's it would do any harm."

"And it 'll do a h-h-heap of good," says Mark, with a grin. "There's a lot of curiosity itchin' f-f-folks that readin' what that will says will c-cure."

"And that sells newspapers," says Lawyer Jones. "Well, I'm glad to help you all I can." So he went to his safe and came back with the will. We could understand it, all right, though for the life of me I can't see why it wasn't written out plain without so many "whereases" and "theretofores" and "devises," and such like.

Anyhow, the gist of it was that Henry Wigglesworth claimed his mind was as good as new and that this was his regular will, and no other one was worth a cent. Then he said his debts had to be paid, which they would have had to be, whether he said it or not, I guess. Then he "gave, devised, and bequeathed," whatever that means, all the "rest, residue, and remainder" of his property to "any heir or heirs in direct line

of descent from myself, if such exist or can be found."

All that meant, Lawyer Jones explained, was that he wanted his property to go to his sons or daughters, or his grandsons or granddaughters or great-grandsons or great-granddaughters, if he had any.

Then the will said if nobody could find any of these direct heirs the property was to go to George Gardener Grover, only son of Mr. Wigglesworth's only sister. And there you are.

"Um!" says Mark when Lawyer Jones was through. "'Tis f-f-funny, hain't it? These heirs, now. Why didn't he up and name 'em by n-name?"

"I can't tell you," said Lawyer Jones.

"He acts," says I, "like he wasn't sure whether he had any or not."

Mark looked at me with a squint, his little eyes twinkling like everything. "Binney," says he, "that's a g-good shot. I'll bet that's it. Anyhow, we'll m-make b'lieve it is till we find out different. Got to have s-somethin' to start on."

"To start what on?" says I.

"Why," says he, "the job of f-f-findin' these heirs, or of findin' out there hain't any." Then

he turned to Mr. Jones. "Mr. Wigglesworth must 'a' had a son or daughter or s-somethin'," says he, "or he wouldn't be s-suspectin' he had grandchildern or great-grandchildern."

"That sounds reasonable," said Mr. Jones.

"Ever hear of any?" says Mark.

"In the years Mr. Wigglesworth has been here," said Mr. Jones, "he has never mentioned a relative to me. No, I never heard that he had a child or a wife. Somehow I had always supposed he was an old bachelor."

"Gets queerer every minute," says Mark.

"Well," says I, "we can't sit here figgerin' about it. We got work to do."

"Sometimes," says Mark, "sittin' and figgerin' is the most valuable work there is."

"Maybe sometimes," says I, "but this hain't one of 'em. We've got ink and paper to buy and Tecumseh Androcles Spat to feed, and rent, and a heap of things. And you said yourself we didn't have any workin' capital. Since we ran that bazaar I've had a heap of respect for workin' capital."

"Me too," says Mark. "And there's no chance of g-g-gettin' more money from dad. Ma set her foot down hard. She says we can waste what was put into this paper, but she won't see another cent go after it, and when ma says

it like that there hain't any use arguin'. We got to sink or swim all by ourselves."

"Well," says I, "I guess we made a profit on this week's *Trumpet*, anyhow."

"Yes," says Mark, "but there's other weeks a-comin'."

We thanked Lawyer Jones and started to go.

"Come again," says he. "If you get any libel suits on your hands I'll take care of them for you at cost, so to speak. Glad to see you any time."

When we were outside I says to Mark, "Now don't go gettin' all het up about this mystery. We got enough on our hands now. We can't run a paper on nothin' and find missin' heirs and investigate mysterious liner advertisements put in the paper by men with black gloves, and a dozen other things. We got to settle down to this paper job."

"Sure," says Mark. "That's what I'm doin'. Hain't gettin' news about the biggest thing a newspaper has to do?"

"No," says I, "gettin' money is."

He grinned like he does sometimes when he's ready to admit he's getting the worst of an argument.

"Maybe you're r-r-right, Binney," says he, "and then again, maybe this heir-huntin' and

mystery-piercin' will help to get that money. Never can tell."

"I wouldn't depend on it," says I.

"I sha'n't," says he. "Come on to the office."

Plunk and Tallow were there, and so was Tecumseh Androcles. He was standing up, making a speech to the fellows.

"Ah," says he, when we came in, "here is the editor and another of the staff. I, Tecumseh Androcles Spat, wish to congratulate you on the first issue of the rejuvenated *Trumpet*. It was an achievement. On your part, you have filled the paper with pertinent reading-matter and with lucrative advertising. On my part, I have put it in type in such a manner as to cause favorable comment, even from the metropolitan press. I am proud to be associated with you. I hope the relation will long continue and that the progress of this deserving paper will be marked and rapid."

"Good for you," says Mark, "but one swallow don't make a summer. Wait till we see what happens next week. See how many new subscribers we can gaffle on to, and how m-m-many advertisements we can get. Likewise, let's not forget the job-printin' end of it. Now, let's buckle down f'r the n-n-next issue."

Which we did.

CHAPTER VI

NEXT morning Mark and Tallow and Plunk and I were in the office just after the train from the city came in. A strange man came slamming through the door like he figured out his errand was pretty important and he was pretty important himself.

"Where's the editor?" says he in about the same voice you might expect somebody to say, "Who stole my horse?"

"I'm h-him," says Mark, and I could see his face sort of setting like it does when he thinks something unpleasant is going to happen and he's got to use his wits.

"Huh!" says the man, looking him over. "There's enough of you, hain't there—except so far as age is concerned."

Now, if there's one thing Mark hates to be twitted about it's his size; it riles him to have anybody make fun of it, and his little eyes began to get sharp and bright. "Look out, mister,"

says I to myself. Mark didn't say anything, though, except, "What can I d-do for you."

"You can hand over the cash for *that*," says the man, throwing a piece of paper down on the counter.

Mark picked it up and looked at it. You couldn't tell by his face what he thought of it, though he read it pretty careful and then didn't say anything for quite a spell.

"Well, my fat friend," says the man, "what about it?"

Mark looked him over hard, and then says, "Mister, if you had as much manners as I've got flesh, you and me would get along b-b-better."

"Don't git fresh," says the man.

"Look here," says Mark, "this is my office. If you c-c-come in here like you ought to, actin' d-decent, you'll be treated the same. If you've got any b-business with me, act like a b-business man. If you can't act that way—git out. There's the d-door. I guess whatever b-business there is to do can be done with your boss."

The man sort of eased off a trifle and acted a little more like he was a regular human being instead of a bear with a toothache.

"I was sent here to collect that bill," says he.

"All right," says Mark. "Now what about

that bill? I don't know anythin' about it. So f-f-far as I know I don't owe any bill. What m-makes you think I do?"

"It's for paper," says the man. "Paper sold to the Wicksville *Trumpet* more 'n three months ago, and it hain't never been paid for. The boss he told me either to git the money or to shut up your shop for you. So which 'll it be?"

"N-neither for a minute," says Mark. "Here you come rushin' in here with a b-b-bill for eighty-seven dollars that I hain't ever heard of. Before anythin' else happens I want to know a l-little more about it."

"There hain't any more to know. You've had the paper, and we hain't ever had the money."

"But we don't owe it," says Tallow. "We just bought this paper a few days ago."

"Well," says the man, "you bought its bills with it, didn't you?"

"Not if we could h-help it," says Mark. "Now, mister, you come with me. We'll f-f-find out."

So all of us went to Lawyer Jones and told him the facts. He looked sorry and acted sorry, but he said there wasn't anything to do but pay it. "It's a shame," say she, "and you've been swindled, but it can't be helped. The old proprietor owed this money, and concealed the

fact when you bought the paper. It isn't honest, but the people who sold the paper aren't to blame. The man who sold you the *Trumpet* is. According to law you'll have to pay."

"Um!" says Mark, tugging at his cheek like he always does when he's thinking hard. "Eighty-seven d-d-dollars. Woosh!"

"We 'ain't got it," says I.

"Mister," says Mark, "you see h-how it is. 'Tain't *our* fault this bill isn't paid. Seems to me like the l-l-least you could do would be to give us some more time."

"It don't rest with me," says he. "I was sent here to git the money or to put you out of business. Them's orders, and I'm a man that obeys his orders every time. You can bet on that."

"Come b-back to the office," says Mark.

We all went back there, and us four boys held a little meeting to see how much cash we had. Every cent we could scrape up in the world, and that included advertising bills that hadn't been paid, was seventy-six dollars. We'd had to spend some for supplies and such.

"Will you t-t-take fifty dollars," says Mark, "and wait for the rest?"

"I'll take eighty-seven dollars," says the man.

"F-fellers," says Mark, "we're eleven d-dollars shy. Looks like we *got* to pay. Tallow, you go out and collect in what's owin' us. Tell the f-f-folks why we got to have it. They'll p-pay. The rest of us 'll get the eleven dollars. You, mister, sit down and wait half an hour."

Out we went, and I says to Mark, "How we goin' to git that eleven dollars?"

"I just got a s-scheme," says he, "while that man was talkin'. It's about Home-Comin' Week. We'll get out a s-special Home-Comin' Edition. Get the idee?"

"I don't," says I.

"Here it is," says he. "We'll print a p-page full of pictures of our l-leadin' citizens, with a little piece about each of 'em. The cuts of the photographs 'll cost about a dollar apiece, and we'll charge 'em two dollars 'n' a h-half to have 'em put in. That l-leaves a d-dollar 'n' a half to cover the cost of paper and p-printin'. Be a nice profit in it."

"You won't git nobody," says I.

"Binney," says he, "you hain't got any idee how many folks wants to see their picture in the p-paper. We'll git a lot."

"Go ahead," says I, "but you'll see."

"Got the idee so's you understand it?" says he to Plunk and me.

We told him we guessed so.

"Can you t-talk it?" says he.

"We can try," says I.

"Then," says he, "Tallow 'll take the right side of Main Street, Binney, you take the left side, and don't miss anybody, clerks and all. I'll kind of s-s-skirmish around."

I went along and talked to four people, and every one of them said they didn't want anything to do with it, just like I told Mark, so I went back to the corner pretty disgusted with the idea. I met Plunk there, and he was disgusted, too.

"Knew it wouldn't work," says he.

"Where's Mark?" says I.

"He went that way," says he, pointing.

"Let's find him," says I; so off we went.

Pretty soon we saw him come around the corner and go into the milkman's yard.

"What's he goin' in there for?" Tallow says. "Can't be figgerin' on gettin' anythin' out of Ol' Hans Richter."

"Let's find out," says I, and we went along and followed Mark right back into Richter's barn. Richter was standing in the barn door with a milk-pail over each arm, and Mark was talking to him. Just as we got there Old Hans says:

"Mein picture in your baber, eh? Ho! What for does Ol' Hans want mit a picture in the baber?"

"It isn't what you w-w-want," says Mark, "it's what the f-f-folks in town want. Why, Mr. Richter, this thing won't be worth a cent if you ain't in it! What kind of a p-page of prominent citizens of Wicksville would it b-be if you wasn't there? No good. Folks 'u'd say, 'Where's Hans Richter? Where's the man that's been f-fetchin' our milk for twenty year?' That's what they'd say. And folks comin' from out of t-t-town would want to know what b-business we had printin' other men's pictures and leavin' yours out. Why, Mr. Richter, we *d-dassen't* leave you out!"

"You t'ink dot?"

"You bet I do. We just *got* to have you. You don't think we want to have to print Jim Withers's picture, do you? He hain't been p-peddlin' milk here more 'n two years."

"Jim Withers, iss it? Ho! You print his picture in your baber if mine I do not give? Eh?"

"We'd have to, but we don't *want* to."

"By yimminy, you don't haff to. Nein. Shall der people be cheated? Nein. Dey shall haff Hans Richter's picture, and not any other.

Jim Withers! Whoosh! He iss a no-goot milkman. How much you said dot vass?"

"Two d-dollars 'n' a half," says Mark.

Old Hans dug down into his back pocket and pulled out a leather bag, and I'm going to turn as black as a crow if he didn't give Mark the money.

"Now," says he, "I giff you dot picture, eh? Vun I got w'ich was took in mein vedding coat a year ago. Dot coat iss yet as goot as new, and fourt-one year old it iss. Ya. Fourt-one year."

"Fine," says Mark, and in a minute Old Hans gave him the picture and Mark turned around to where we were.

"How you comin'?" says he.

"Poor," says I.

"How about you?" says Plunk.

"P-perty good," says Mark. "I got four."

"*Four*," says I. "So quick! How'd you do it, and who be they?"

"Well, there's Richter, and old man Meigs, our leadin' veteran of the Civil War, and Grandad Jones, that crossed the plains in a p-prairie schooner, and Uncle Ike Bond."

"I surrender," says I. "If you kin git them old coots you kin git anybody. I'm through. Nobody 'll listen to me or Plunk. You sail in and git 'em."

He grinned the way he does when he's tickled with himself and when he knows folks are appreciating what a brainy kid he is.

"It's easy," says he. "Just m-make 'em feel how important they are. You f-fellows go and see what news you can p-pick up. I'll git in these pictures."

And I'll be kicked hard if he didn't. In an hour he came to the office with ten photographs and twenty-two dollars and a half. He handed over to the collector man what was due him, for Tallow had got in most of the collections, and had enough left to pay for the cuts of the photographs. The man signed a receipt for the money and went away, looking like he was disappointed.

"Well," says Mark, "we s-s-scrambled out of *that* hole, didn't we? But we got to do some harder s-scramblin' now. I'm goin' after more photographs."

He took most of the day at it, and when night come around how many do you think he'd grabbed on to? Forty-one. Yes, sir. And he had the cash money for every one of them. That left us with just exactly ninety-one dollars and a half in the treasury, and so we were really some better off than we had been before the collector came around.

"Fiddlesticks!" says Tallow. "Wisht the collector hadn't showed up. We'd almost be *rich*."

"If he hadn't s-s-showed up," says Mark, "we wouldn't have thought up this s-scheme. It's *havin'* to do things that makes folks do their best. Bein' necessary is one of the best things can happen to a f-f-fellow."

Wasn't that just like him! And you'll notice he didn't grab all the credit himself, though, goodness knows, he was entitled to it. No, sir, he says, "we" thought up the scheme. He was the real kind of a kid to do anything with, because he kept you feeling good. All the time you knew he was the one that was thinking up things and doing them. All we did was trail around and help. But just the same, he made us feel we had as much to do with it as he did. I expect we worked all the harder because of that. Do you know, I shouldn't wonder if that was a pretty good way for all folks that has other folks working for them to act. The working folks would work harder and take more pleasure in it. I expect Mark had it all figured out that way.

CHAPTER VII

AFTER supper we met at the office, though I'm bound to say I wasn't tickled to death with the prospect of what was ahead.

"Mark," says I, "here we're goin' out to Center Line Bridge to meddle with somethin' that don't concern us. It 'u'd serve us right if this Man With the Black Gloves caught us and gave us the larrupin' of our lives."

"'Tis our b-business," says Mark. "Anythin' that's suspicious is the business of a newspaper man. There's news in it. . . . And b-besides I figger it's our duty to do."

When Mark Tidd starts talking about duty you might as well lay down and roll over. You couldn't change his mind with a ton of giant powder.

"Duty?" says I. "How?"

"Well," says he, "as citizens. Maybe these f-fellers are plannin' somethin' that ought to be stopped, and there hain't anybody to stop it but us, b-because nobody else suspects 'em."

"All right," says I, "I expect I can run as fast as any of you."

"Besides," says Mark, "the man the Man With the Black Gloves is g-goin' to meet is named Jethro."

"What's that got to do with it?" I says.

"Heaps," says Mark, and then shut up like a clam. That's the way with him. Sometimes he gets it into his head to be mysterious and to keep his notions shut up under his hat. Well, when he does you might as well forget them, for he's as close-mouthed as a bulldog with a tramp's pants in his teeth.

"Come on, then," says I, "let's get it over."

It was a half-hour's walk to the bridge, but before we got within a quarter of a mile of it Mark halted us.

"We can't go bangin' up t-t-there with a brass b-band," says he. "There wouldn't be any meetin'. We got to come the Indian."

"Crawl a quarter of a mile through witch-hazel and swamp on our bellies, I expect," says I.

"There hain't any law compellin' you to come, Binney," says Mark, "but I f-figgered you wouldn't want to miss anythin'."

"I don't," says I, "not even a good lickin', which most likely we'll git. You hain't got any

idea, Mark," says I, "how I love a good lickin'."

He laughed and says, "Say, Binney, anybody'd think you was a million years old. Hain't there any f-f-fun in you? Here's a reg'lar game to p-play that beats any game you can think up, and we can add to it by p-pretendin'." He was the greatest fellow for pretending I ever saw, and when he was at it he almost had you believing that what he *made believe* was so.

"Go on," says I, "start up your game. I'll be taggin' right on behind."

"All right," says he. "Us four kids are the f-f-faithful followers of a young Duke. This young Duke has disappeared, and we kind of figger his enemy, the Knight With the Black Gauntlets, has captured him and is holdin' him for r-ransom. See? But we don't know where. But our scouts tell us the Knight With the Black Gauntlets is close to our castle and we set out to watch him to see if we can't rescue the Duke—and here we be. We know our enemy's ahead somewheres, and we want to git clost to him to watch him and overhear what he s-says, if he says anythin'. Most likely the Duke will make us all knights if we rescue him, and I've always sort of hankered to be a knight."

"Me too," says Plunk. "Them knights sure

had a circus, ridin' around with lances and bustin' up tournaments and lickin' everybody they met by slammin' 'em over the head with an iron mallet or pokin' 'em off a horse with a lance. That there Richard Cur the Lion was the best one, eh? Say, Mark, what did they call him Cur the Lion for? Curs and lions hain't got much in common."

"'Tain't Cur," says Mark, "though it *does* s-sound like it. You spell it C-o-e-u-r. The whole thing means 'of the Lion Heart.'"

"Fine," says Plunk. "That's a bully name."

"If you want a name," says I, "I'll give you one."

"What?" says he.

"Plunk of the Wooden Head," says I, because I was sort of disgusted.

"And I'll g-give *you* one," says Mark. "It's Binney of the Complainin' Tongue."

I didn't say anything. There wasn't anything to say, and I might have known better, in the first place, than to go fooling with a scheme of Mark's and making fun of it. So I shut up and was glad to.

"Now," says Mark, "I f-figger that Knight 'll stop clost to the bridge that crosses the river dividin' his lands from ourn. Maybe there 'll be a m-messenger a-waitin' there for him. It's

our business to hear what's said, because a word may be d-dropped that 'll show us where he's imprisoned our master, the Duke."

"How'll we manage it?" says Tallow.

"Divide up," says Mark. "You two men-at-arms, Tallow and Plunk, sneak over and come to the b-bridge from the left side of the road. There's thick alders growin' right there and you can scrooch down in 'em. Binney and I will t-tackle the job from the right. Then, if one p-party's discovered and s-slain, the other party's got a chance to come through alive and rescue the Duke."

"Huh!" says I. "I know which party I hope gits slain, if anybody does, and I hain't one of it."

We started off then, Mark and I going to the right, and Tallow and Plunk cutting off through the woods to the left.

"We want to get there g-good and early," says Mark, "so as to get all p-placed and settled before the Knight with the Black Gauntlets comes."

"All right," says I. "Maybe I can't think as fast as you can, but I can make my legs go faster."

So off we went, for a while going as fast as we could plug, then, when we were getting so near

that a man on the bridge might hear us, Mark made me stop hurrying and crawl.

"Maybe they got g-guards out," says he, "and we can't take any chances."

So we crawled the rest of the way, dodging from one tree to another and getting mud on our knees and tearing holes in our pants. But it was fun. I was beginning to get excited myself, and I believe I really got to worrying about the young Duke that was held a captive. Yes, sir, I felt pretty bad about the hole he had got himself into, and says to Mark I hoped they gave him enough to eat and treated him decent.

That's how persuading Mark is. He really gets you to think things are happening that he's only pretending about.

Anyhow, we got to the bridge, or rather so close to it we could look it over careful and see if anybody was there. But not a soul was in sight.

" 'Tain't safe," says Mark, "even if it looks l-like it was. They may be in ambush along the road. We got to f-find out."

We kept on crawling until we were sure nobody was on our side of the bridge anywheres. Then Mark made us wade the river, which was only about up to our knees in spots, to be sure nobody was hid on the other side. It would have been fine if there hadn't been a hole there and if I

hadn't stepped in it. But I did, and fell down and floundered around and let out a yell.

"Hey!" Mark whispered. "Shut up! Want to git a l-lance through your stummick?"

"Don't expect a feller to drownd without makin' a noise, do you?" says I. "I notice you didn't fall into any holes."

"No," says he, with a grin. "I had you walk first so if there was one you'd sort of warn me of it."

"Which I done," says I, feeling pretty chilly and not what you could call comfortable.

"You've been wet before," says he, "and it didn't hurt you."

"Probably," says I, "it won't hurt me this time, but that hain't no reason I should be happy about it."

We didn't say any more until we'd scouted out the other side of the bridge and found that none of the Knight's men were hidden there.

"Now," says Mark, "we want to hide ourselves so's we can overhear what they s-s-say. Let's f-find a good place."

It was an old wooden bridge, and when you looked up at it from below you made up your mind that it had better be fixed some time before long, for you could see through cracks and splits and broken boards right up to the sky.

"What's the matter," says I, "with hidin' down under the bridge, right at the end? Nobody 'll look there, and we can sit on the bank in the mud and be comfortable. I love to sit in the mud," says I.

"Good idee," says Mark. "Fine idee. We can hear p-plain, and not one chance in a hunderd of bein' seen."

Under we got and settled there as comfortable as was possible. I don't know if you ever sat in black mud under an old bridge with your clothes dripping and the evening chilly, but if you did, and got any fun out of it, why then, you are better at enjoying yourself than I am. My teeth got to chattering.

"Keep s-still," says Mark.

"You'll have to hold my jaw if you want me to," says I. "The cold makes it wiggle and rattle my teeth."

"Stuff your cap in your mouth," says he, which I did. Oh, it was a pleasant party, what with chewing on an old cap and all that!

"Wonder if Tallow and Plunk are on deck," says I.

"Sure," says he; "you can always d-d-depend on *them*."

"Meanin'," says I, and feeling sort of peevish, "that you can't depend on me."

"You n-notice," says he, "that I picked you to come with me, don't you?"

That made me feel pretty good, like praise always does make a fellow, even if he don't deserve it, and after that the cold wasn't so chilly nor my clothes so clammy on my back.

After about half an hour, which seemed like a week, we heard a horse coming. It stopped at the end of the bridge and a man got out. He whistled, but nobody answered, and the man started to pacing up and down from one end of the bridge to the other. Then in another ten minutes up came another rig, and a man got out of it.

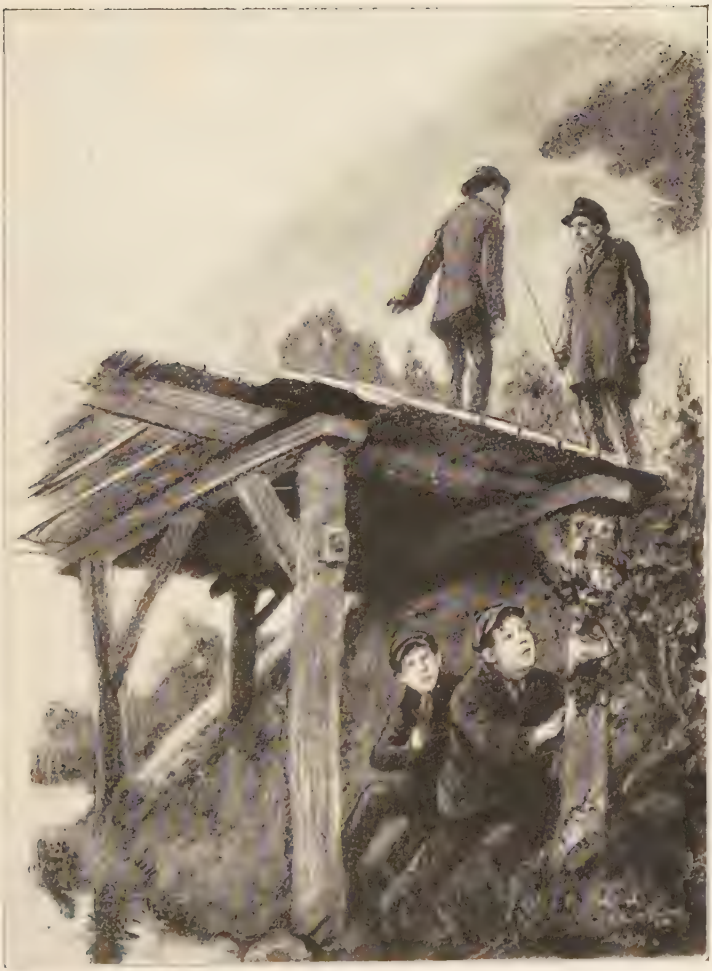
"I been waitin' for you," says the first man.

"Huh!" says the second, and we recognized him as the Man With the Black Gloves, or the Knight With the Black Gauntlets, like he was promoted to be to-night.

"Well?" he says in a minute.

"Everythin's all right," said the first man. "Rock don't remember nothin' he hadn't ought to, 'cause I've questioned him mighty close. Nobody's been sneakin' around to see him, though a lot of Jakes have drove by to stare at him since them kids had that piece in the paper."

"Wigglesworth didn't leave any writing?" says the Knight.



"HUH!" SAYS THE SECOND MAN, AND WE RECOGNIZED HIM AS THE MAN WITH THE BLACK GLOVES

"Not what you'd call writin'. Though he might. Acted toward the last like he was suspicious of me. Didn't let on nothin' to me, and kept to himself. One night he was writin' in the library, but what he wrote I dunno. Maybe it was letters. He didn't leave anythin' around. That is, except a puzzle or somethin' he wrote out for Rock."

"Puzzle," says the Knight.

"Yes," says the first man, "puzzle, or else he'd gone crazy."

"What become of it?"

"Rock's got it."

"Thought I said to grab every bit of writing you could get your hands on."

"This didn't amount to nothin'," said the man.

"You aren't on the job to think, but to do what you're told."

"Well, I done it," says the man; "anyhow I made a copy of it, and give the old man's writin' to the kid."

"Let's have it," says the Knight.

He read it, or I guess that's what he was doing, because he was still awhile. Then he grunted, disgusted-like.

"No sense to it," says he.

"Not a mite," says the other man.

"But there may be," says the Knight.

"Shucks!" says the man.

"Wigglesworth was queer—and suspicious. Look how he acted toward the boy. Maybe he made a writing. Seems like he must have. Didn't *tell* anybody, so far as I can find out. That's certain, I guess. But he must have written. *Must* have. And we've got to find it. Never can tell when a writing will pop up just when it will send you higher than a kite."

"I've looked till my eyes is wore out."

"Look some more," says the Knight.

"Where's Pekoe?"

"Nobody knows. Gone off to South America or India or the North Pole again, likely. *He* won't bother us."

"May some day."

"Don't believe he knows enough about things. If he had he'd hung around."

And right there Tallow Martin let out a sneeze. I knew it was Tallow, because there ain't a man, woman, child, horse, cow, or mule in Wicksville that could enter a sneezing match with him and even get second prize. Tallow would get all the prizes if there was a dozen.

"What's that?" says the Knight.

"Sneeze," says the other man.

"Somebody's around here—listening," says

the Knight. "It came from that way. Quick! After them."

Off they went, tearing into the bushes, and we could hear Plunk and Tallow get up and flounder away. Mark was disgusted.

"Tallow," says he, "ought to train his nose to be quiet, or sell it to a lighthouse for a fog-horn. Now the fat's in the f-f-fire."

"They'll never catch those kids," says I.

"Not likely to," says he, "but they'll be on their guard now. They know somebody was listenin'—and if somebody was l-listenin' it means somebody was suspicious of 'em."

"Looks that way," says I, "but what do we suspect 'em of?"

"I don't know," says he, "but it's somethin' to do with Mr. Wigglesworth and that kid."

"Sure," says I, "but let's not worry about that right now. Let's make tracks while they're gone."

"Can't leave Plunk and Tallow," says he. "Maybe they n-n-need help."

That was Mark all over. He'd stick to you like a corn-plaster, and he wouldn't quit sticking till he'd got you out of any fix you were in. Of course I couldn't go off, either, and not know what had happened, so we climbed out of the mud and started into the woods after the men.

We didn't go far, though, before we heard them coming back, and laid down behind some bushes till they were past. They didn't have any captives, so we knew the kids were safe.

"Well," says Mark, when it was safe to move along again, "we know one thing. We know where our master, the Duke, is imprisoned."

"Oh," says I, "do we?"

"Yes," says he, "he's shut up in Castle Wigglesworth, and they won't l-let him use his own name, but call him Rock. The next thing on our program is to t-t-try to get a chance to talk to him and l-look over the lay of the land."

We went on back to the printing-office as quick as we could, and Plunk and Tallow were there looking pretty scratched up and dilapidated, and frightened a little, I guess. Mark didn't say a word about Tallow's sneezing, though Tallow looked pretty guilty. But Mark knew Tallow didn't do it on purpose, and he never lit into a fellow much, anyhow. If you did something that was wooden-headed he might look at you so you'd wish the floor would open up and let you through, but that would be all. Oh, he was a bully fellow to go into things with, all right.

"Now," says he, "we b-better get to bed. To-morrow Binney and I are goin' to Wiggles-

worth Castle to t-try to see the Duke and to get a squint at that p-puzzle paper he's got. Maybe there's somethin' important in it. Bet there is."

And we all headed for home.

CHAPTER VIII

"WHAT'S in the box?" says I to Mark Tidd next morning when we had started out toward what he was still calling Castle Wigglesworth.

"Did you f-f-fetch a lunch?" says he.

"No," says I.

"Didn't think you would," says he, "so I f-fetched enough for two."

I looked at the box. Honest, it reminded me more of a piano box than anything else; anyhow, of a good-sized packing-case.

"Is that full?" says I.

"Couldn't git in another crumb," says he.

"How long you plannin' to stay?"

"Home 'fore supper."

"And that's just lunch!" says I.

"Nothin' but a s-snack," says he. "Didn't put in a thing but six pieces of apple p-p-pie and eight ham sandriches and a few fried-cakes, and three-four bananas, and a l-little hunk of cake, and some f-f-fried chicken, and a h-hunk

of bread in case we didn't have enough sandriches, and some b-butter—"

"And a barrel of flour," says I, "and a crate of eggs, and a crock of baked beans, and a side of bacon—"

"Huh!" says he. "I guess there won't be much l-left."

"I wonder," says I, "if they let our Duke go prancin' around outdoors, or do they keep him shut up in a dongeon?"

"Can't never tell about this crowd," says Mark. "They're l-liable to do 'most anythin'. I calc'late, though, he'll be let out some, with a strong guard."

"If the guard's around, how'll we git to talk to him?"

"That's what we got to f-find out," says he.

We got to where we could see Mr. Wigglesworth's house—the castle, I should say—along about nine o'clock. It was a big place with porches and lots of windows and curlicues and gables and wings, and such like. I can't ever see what one old man ever did with all of it. It was in the middle of a whopping yard that was beginning to look run down. The grass hadn't been cut as often as it ought to have been, and things was beginning to grow up in the gravel

walk. In a month more it would look like one of those houses where nobody lives.

There was a hedge all along the front higher than my head, but when we had crept up close I poked my head through and had a good look. It was a funny kind of a place. Sort of a menagerie, only the animals weren't alive. There were some deer and a big dog and a cat and a lion—all made out of stone or something.

"Huh!" says I. "If *I* was goin' to keep pets I'll bet they'd be the kind I could teach tricks to. What good 's a stone dog, *I'd* like to know."

"It's art," says Mark.

"Oh," says I, "it is, eh? I thought art was daubin' paint on a piece of cloth, and then puttin' a gold frame around it."

"Anythin's art," says Mark, "that hain't good for nothin' but to look at."

"Then," says I, "I hain't art."

"No," says Mark, "but you come m-mighty clost to it."

"Where d'you s'pose the Duke is?" says I, changing the subject because I couldn't see any use talking about art any more. I wasn't interested in art. "I don't see no guards," says I, "and I don't see the Duke."

But just then a kid came around the corner of the house. He was just an ordinary-looking kid, though it didn't seem like he was enjoying himself very much. He sat down alongside the stone dog and propped his head up in his hands and stared at the ground.

"L-lonesome," says Mark, sympathetic-like.

"Let's go in and play with him," says I.

"Sure," says Mark, sarcastic, "and s-spill the whole mess of beans. What would the Knight With the Black Gauntlets do if he saw us playin' with that Duke, eh? He wouldn't suspect anythin', would he?"

"Let's git him over here, then," says I.

"Charm him over l-like a snake does a bird," says Mark.

But the Duke saved us trouble by getting up and walking over toward the hedge and then following the hedge around toward us. When he was right opposite us Mark whistled low and cautious. The Duke stopped and looked.

"We're r-right here behind the hedge," says Mark. "Don't act like you was t-t-talkin' to anybody. Come and sit down with your back ag'in' that l-little mountain-ash tree."

The boy did like Mark said, acting sort of surprised, but not frightened a bit. I guess he had pretty good nerve, because I figger I'd be

some scared to have a voice I couldn't see, and wasn't expecting, and didn't know anything about, go ordering me around.

"Be you Rock?" asked Mark.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"I'm Mark Tidd, and Binney Jenks is with me. We came out to talk to you."

"You better not let Jethro see you," says Rock. "What do you want of me?"

"First," says Mark, "we want to git acquainted. And when we're acquainted and you git so you can trust us, then we want to see if there hain't s-somethin' we can do to help you."

"I don't know that I need any help," says Rock, stiff-like.

"If you don't," says Mark, "you're the f-first feller I ever see that didn't. For instance, Rock, wouldn't you l-like to be helped to know what you're here at Wigglesworth's for? Eh? Don't suppose that's been worryin' you any. From what you say Jethro don't want f-folks talkin' to you. Wouldn't you like to know why? Do you know the Man With the Black Gloves? And did you know him and Jethro met on Center Line Bridge l-last night and t-talked you over? Why d'you s'pose they did that?"

"Where do you come in?" says Rock.

"Well," says Mark, "there's a number of r-reasons for my comin' in. First, I'm in the newspaper b-business, and I want the news. Second, I kind of like m-monkeyin' around with mysteries. It's got to be a habit with me."

"Hum!" says Rock, and sat quiet a spell, sort of thinking it over. Pretty soon he says: "Well, it can't do any harm if it doesn't do any good. I"—his voice sort of wabbled for a second and I hoped he wasn't going to blubber—"I've been mighty lonesome—almost always."

"That's p-perty rotten, hain't it?" says Mark.

"You'd think so," says Rock, "if you hadn't ever had any folks at all that you knew about, and had lived with folks that kept you just because somebody paid your board, and had been sent off to schools where the fellows thought you were queer because you didn't know anything about yourself and never made friends with you."

"I'll b-bet I would," says Mark in a way he has when he's sorry for anybody. Somehow he manages to make you feel some better right off. "And we—there's f-four of us—would like to be friends with you if you'll let us. Honest. And we'd l-like to help you out. We ain't just

s-stickin' our noses into your business out of curiosity."

"I wish I could get a look at you," says Rock, sort of dubious.

Mark chuckled and nudged me. You could see he liked Rock saying that, and afterward he said to me that right there he made up his mind the strange boy was all right. "He ain't anybody's fool," says he, "and if you go trustin' anybody before you get a good l-look into his eyes, why, then you'll run a fine chance of bein' a fool."

He says to Rock, "Come out and take a l-look, then."

"I dassent," says Rock. "Jethro's watchin' me all the time, and he ordered me not to go outside the hedge nor to speak to any one."

"I b'lieve in orders bein' obeyed when somebody gives 'em that's got the right to," says Mark, "but this Jethro hain't no more right to be b-bossin' you than I have, which hain't any at all."

"I know that," says Rock, "but if he catches me there won't be any fun in it."

"We'll fix it so's he *won't* catch you," says Mark. "Wait a minute till I think."

He studied over it a minute, and then says to Rock: "Hain't there an arbor back there a c-couple of hunderd feet?"

"Yes," says Rock.

"Does it back right against the hedge?" says Mark.

Rock looked careful and said it did.

"Good," says Mark. "You sort of l-loaf back there slow and like you didn't have anythin' in mind. We'll crawl up along the hedge and b-burrow through. 'Tain't likely we'll be seen in there."

"All right," says Rock, and off he went. Mark watched to see how he did it, and nodded like he was satisfied. "Look," says he to me. "That kid's got b-brains."

Rock did act fine, and not a bit like he had anything on his mind. He just sort of wandered around, but every little bit he managed to get nearer to the arbor. Then he stooped and picked up a stone out of the driveway in front of the house and chucked it at the arbor. Like anybody would, he stopped to see where the stone hit, and then he walked over there slow and poked around the arbor like he was sort of curious to see how it was built.

"Come on," says Mark, and we snaked it on our stummicks till we was right back of the arbor. I poked my head through, and then wiggled through myself. It wasn't so easy for Mark, because a hole that would

do for me wouldn't be big enough for one of his legs, but he made it at last, considerable scratched and het up. Then he whistled soft.

In a minute Rock came mooching in, but he didn't come right in. He stopped in the door and looked at it. It wasn't a door, but just a sort of open arch, and he shook the side to see if it was strong, and turned around and looked all over the yard. Then he moved back in as slow as molasses, until he figgered it was safe to quit acting and look us over.

"Hello!" says he.

"I'm Mark Tidd," says Mark, "and this is Binney Jenks."

Rock didn't say anything, but just eyed Mark steady, and then me; finally he stuck out his hand and says, "I like your looks."

"Fine," says Mark, "then everybody's satisfied. I kind of like my looks myself. There's enough of 'em." Mark would joke about his being fat himself, but if anybody else went to trying it they wanted to look out. "There's this about us," says Mark, "we may not be able to do you any good, but it's s-s-sure we can't do you any harm."

"Whether you do me good or harm," says Rock, "I'm goin' to tie to you. Just," says he,

"for the sake of bein' able to say to myself that I've got some friends."

"Bully for you," says Mark. "Now l-let's get to business. What's your whole name?"

"Roscoe Beaumont," says he.

"How old?"

"Sixteen."

"Where was you b-born?"

"I don't know?"

"What was your f-f-father's first name?"

"I don't know."

"What was your m-mother's name before she was married?"

"I don't know."

"Who brought you to Mr. Wigglesworth's?"

"A man by the name of Pekoe."

"*What?*" says Mark.

"Pekoe," says Rock, and then I remembered that the Man With the Black Gloves had mentioned this Pekoe on the bridge.

"Who is Pekoe?"

"I don't know," says Rock.

"How did he happen to f-fetch you here?"

"He came to the school where I was and said my father had told him to come after me the first chance he got and take me to Henry Wigglesworth in Wicksville, Michigan, but he says that was several years ago, and this was the

first time he'd been in my part of the United States since then. He said my father was dead, and that he died down in South America."

"Oh," says Mark. "I guess your mother must 'a' died a long time ago "

"When I was a baby," says Rock.

"And t-t-that's all you know about yourself?"

"Every single word."

"Don't know why you was to be f-f-fetched to Mr. Wigglesworth?"

"No."

"What did Mr. Wigglesworth say when you came?"

"Nothin'. Pekoe he left me outside and went to the house. He was gone half an hour and came back and said I was to go in. Pekoe went on out of the gate and I went in. Jethro met me and fixed up a room for me. I didn't see Mr. Wigglesworth for a couple of days. He never came out of his room. Guess he was perty sick then. One night when he thought I was asleep he came into my room with a light turned down, and looked at me. I pretended I was asleep, but I managed to get a look at him just the same. He didn't say a word, but just looked funny—queer. He shook his head and then nodded as much as to say that something

was so. After that he went out. I never saw him again."

"What did you do with the p-p-puzzle he wrote for you the night before he d-died?"

Rock looked sort of surprised that Mark knew about it, but didn't ask any questions. "I got it in my pocket," says he. "It don't mean anythin'. I guess he must have been out of his head."

"Maybe," says Mark. "Can't tell. Mind lettin' me see it?"

Rock pulled it out and handed it over.

"Huh!" says he. "This d-d-don't make *much* sense."

"I can't see it makes any," says Rock.

"If it's what it *may* be," says Mark, "it would take work to f-figger sense out of it. Can I keep it?"

"Yes," says Rock. "Do you think it really is anything?"

"Lemme study it first. Let's see, it says, 'Where pussy looks she walks. Thirty and twenty and ten and forty-six. Stop ninety degrees in the shade. In. Down. Across. What color is a brick? Investigate. Believe what tells the truth.' Some muddle, hain't it?"

"Clean out of his head when he wrote it," says I.

"Suppose," says Mark, "you knew you was d-dyin', and there was a m-message you wanted to l-leave, and you knew the only man around was ag'in' you, and you dassent trust him, and you was sick and a leetle queer. Suppose you just *had* to leave a m-message that nobody could see sense to, but that had sense in it if it was studied out. Then what? Eh? Maybe," says Mark, waggling his head—"maybe you'd think up a p-p-puzzle like this."

"Do you think it's a—what d'you call 'em—a cryptogram?"

"I think," says Mark, "that there's a chance of it."

"What's a cryptogram?" says I.

"A cipher message," says Mark.

"Oh," says I. "Like havin' each letter in the alphabet a number or some kind of a mark?"

"Yes," says Mark, "only this hain't that kind—if it is one."

"What kind is it?"

"It's one where the words and letters mean just what they are, but where you have to study out what they tell you to do."

"Clear as mud," says I.

"'Tain't what you'd call plain as p-p-print," says Mark, "but I'll study over it." He shoved it into his inside pocket. "We better be gettin'

along, Rock. We'll come as often to see you as we can. You come here every day, and maybe we'll be here or leave a m-message. We'll l-leave it under that stone. If you have any word for us, why, you leave a note under the stone. Eh?"

"All right," says Rock. "I hope you'll come often."

"We will," says Mark, "and we'll keep you posted. You open your ears and eyes and don't miss anythin'."

"You bet," says Rock. "Somehow you got me int'rested, and sort of lookin' ahead. I haven't ever had anything to look ahead to before."

"Maybe you haven't now," says Mark, "so don't get your heart set on it too much."

"Good-by," says Rock. "*Look out,*" he whispered, sudden. "*I see Jethro comin'.*"

In about two jerks of a lamb's tail we were through the hedge and out of sight. Rock sauntered out of the arbor as if nothing had happened, and we saw Jethro stop and talk to him with a scowl. Then we hurried back to town.

CHAPTER IX

DURING the next few days we were pretty busy getting ready for the next issue of the *Trumpet*, so we didn't get to see Rock, and Mark didn't have a minute to study out that puzzle about the cat and what color is a brick and all that. Things didn't go along as smooth this time as they did before. Mark said it was because the novelty had worn off. We got some advertising, but there weren't any full pages, and we didn't get in half a dozen subscriptions, so that when the paper was printed we were just about out of money again.

Our paper, printed with patent insides, as they call them, had to be paid for at the express office before we could get it, and Tecumseh Androcles Spat had had to buy a new pair of pants on account of some trouble with a dog while he was out walking one evening, and ink cost money. You haven't any idea what a lot it takes to print a paper.

Well, we got it out all right, and then started

to sell it. But this time Spragg was right on hand with his Eagle Center *Clarion*, and had kids selling it just like we sold the *Trumpet*, only he sold his paper for three cents, while we had to get five or bust.

And this time he had more Wicksville news, though we still beat him there. But folks will buy cheap even if what they're getting isn't so good as what costs a little more. The result of the whole thing was that we got left with a hundred papers on our hands, and that was pretty bad. It was Spragg that did it.

When we knew just how we'd come out we had a meeting in the office to see what to do about it.

"If we could only git rid of Spragg," says Tallow.

"Yes," says I, "he's messin' up the whole show."

"S-sounds easy," says Mark. "How'd you go at it?"

We looked at one another but nobody had any ideas.

"Might sick a dog on him," says I.

"We might get out an Eagle Center edition of the *Trumpet*," says Plunk.

Well, there was an idea and we talked it over, but it wasn't long before we saw that wouldn't

do. We had our hands full now without monkeying with Eagle Center.

"If," says I, "we could only fix it so's folks here didn't want anything to do with Eagle Center—"

"Binney," says Mark, "*there* is an idee. Start a t-town row. Get folks here to hatin' Eagle Center. Make a sort of war, eh? Fine. Now," says he with a grin, "all we got to do is f-figger out how to do it."

"If that Eagle Center paper would only talk mean about Wicksville," says I.

"It won't," says Mark; "they're after Wicksville b-business."

He sat back and pulled at his ear like he does when he's thinking hard, and whistled a little, and reached for his jack-knife and whittled some.

Pretty soon he whacked his leg and says he's got it.

"Well?" says I.

"We'll go to Eagle Center," says he, "and interview a b-b-bunch of folks, and sort of get 'em to talk about Wicksville. Bet we can f-fix it so's they make fun of this town. Then," says he, "there's that old b-business of the trolley line from the city, which might go through here and m-might go through Eagle Center.

What made me think of that was that a s-surveyor got off'n the train to-day, and I asked him what he was up to, and he says he was goin' over the right of way that was laid out a couple of years ago."

"Um!" says I. "Sounds promisin'."

"We'll t-try it," says Mark. "Binney, you and I will go over in the m-mornin'."

So next morning over we went.

I never saw anything so easy. Mark says that folks would rather make fun of somebody or something, whether they've got any reason for doing it or not, than to work and make money, and I guess he's right.

As soon as we began talking about Wicksville they up and sailed into it like they had been waiting for the chance for years. Of course we helped things along by bragging a little and by making a few comparisons that didn't favor Eagle Center any. But it didn't take much urging. Why, we could have got enough interviews to fill the paper twice, and any one of them, when they stood out in print, was enough to make the whole population of Wicksville take off its coats and roll up its shirt-sleeves and start right over to give Eagle Center a walloping.

When we had all we wanted we started back for home, and planned out how we'd use it, and

the way we planned was the one that would do the most good, you bet.

"Now," says Mark, "if we just had some sure news about that t-trolley line."

"We hain't," says I.

"No," says he, "but if Plunk and Tallow 'll git out and tag around after that s-surveyor we'll git some. Just hang around him and ask questions, but don't l-let on you're newspaper men. Just be kids."

So off they went.

They found out that surveyors were going over both routes—the one through Wicksville and the one through Eagle Center. It seems like the company was keeping pretty quiet about the whole thing, but from what Plunk and Tallow could gather, it was pretty sure the trolley line was going through some place.

Well, there was big news, and if Spragg didn't get hold of it it would be bigger than ever.

We set right to work getting things in shape for the next paper, and called in Tecumseh Androcles Spat to tell him all about it and get him to fix up the paper so it would look exciting. He got the idea right away.

"Will Tecumseh A. Spat dress up this paper? You may take it, young gentlemen, from an authority, that he will. It is an opportunity.

This town shall see what a paper with a real story in it should look like. We will hammer them in the eyes with type. We will make our pages leap out to meet them. Ah, this is an occasion such as delights the heart of a compositor and make-up man. I revel in it. Trust me, gentlemen, and you shall not be disappointed."

And we weren't. All we had to do was write the stuff and give it to Tecumseh. Why, he hardly took time to eat or sleep! He was that tickled with himself he almost busted out of his clothes, and we had to keep going hard or he'd have run right away from us.

It was two days before we got the stories all written—the trolley line and what Eagle Center thought of Wicksville. Then we did a little advertising of our own. Mark wrote the signs.

The first one, printed in big type and tacked up in front of our office, went like this:

WICKSVILLE INSULTED

Never were such things said about a town without blood being shed.

Has Wicksville any pride?

You bet it has pride.

READ ABOUT IT IN THE NEXT WICKSVILLE "TRUMPET"

Every word printed was actually uttered.

What will you do about it?

Then we printed about twenty little signs that said:

Where is Wicksville's civic pride?
Will it stand by to be insulted?
Read the insults in the Wicksville *Trumpet.*

That night we put these all up, and the next morning the town was talking. I'll bet twenty folks stopped in the office to ask what it was about, but mum was the word with us. We wouldn't peep.

"It's so," says Mark Tidd. "Every w-w-word of it. This town's been insulted like no town was ever insulted before. It's a shame and somethin' ought to be done about it. The Board of Trade ought to do somethin'."

"But who insulted us?"

"The whole thing's in the n-n-next p-paper," says Mark, getting sort of excited and stuttering like everything. "Wait till the paper comes out."

"We want to know now," says the man.

"Well," says Mark, "I'm sorry, but it hain't possible to accommodate you. This is a newspaper. It's p-printed to give news. That's what we have to sell, and we can't give it away any more than the grocer would give you a p-p-pound of cheese."

"I'll pay you for it," says the man. "Your

paper costs a nickel. Well, there's your nickel. Now give me the news."

"No," says Mark, "that wouldn't be f-f-fair. Other folks have to wait till their paper comes, and so will you." And that was the end of it, though the man kept on asking, and so did other folks.

By the time Thursday got around the town was pretty much worked up. You haven't any idea how much folks think of their town till something happens, and then up in the air they go. Well, Wicksville was up in the air, you can bet, and it looked like it was up there to stay. Some folks was for having a public meeting about it, but others pointed out it was foolish to have a public meeting till you knew what you were going to have it about.

Other folks said, though, that as long as you knew your town had been insulted, what was the difference *how* it was insulted or who did it? Something ought to be done. Of course we didn't do a thing to stop people from feeling that way, either.

At last the *Trumpet* went to press, and she was a dandy. Across the front page was a big head-line:

WICKSVILLE INSULTED BY EAGLE CENTER

Then, side by side, we printed interviews,

heading each one appropriately. Mr. Wiggamore, the justice of the peace at Eagle Center, said every time a loafer came into his court the first question he asked him was, did he come from Wicksville. That was pretty good for a send-off, letting on that Wicksville folks were loafers, but he went farther than that. He said when he had to drive through the country he would go out of his way five miles before he would drive through our town, because our streets were so rotten they weren't fit to drive cattle over, let alone a horse and buggy. We knew that would rile the folks, because we do take pride in our streets.

Next came Mr. Smart, the grocer. He said he wouldn't do business in Wicksville except on a cash basis. That he'd never seen a man from Wicksville he'd trust with a red-hot stove. And he said the town looked like somebody passing in the night had dropped it by accident and forgotten it. Also he said that the man that dropped it was probably mighty glad of it.

Then came Mr. Pilkins, town clerk, and he gave his opinion that Wicksville was the worst-looking, most-run-down, dilapidated, out-at-heel village in Michigan. He said it was a shame; that the rest of the towns in the country ought to take up a collection to help Wicksville folks

paint their houses. He said it was his experience that Wicksville folks were ashamed of where they lived, and didn't let on unless they were cornered, and he said that when they thought they'd be believed they always let on they came from Eagle Center.

Mr. Stoddy said that Wicksville didn't have enterprise enough to keep the hogs out of Main Street. Now that was a lie if there ever was one, and it made me kind of mad myself. He said the best men in our town were the women, and that so far's he could see there wasn't any reason for keeping up such a town at all unless it was that no other town wanted such a lot of folks to live in it.

Well, those are just samples. The men that said them were more than nine-tenths joking, all right, but when you saw what they said right in cold type it looked pretty bad. Whee! but it looked bad.

Then, right on top of those insults, and a lot more, we printed another big head-line:

SHALL EAGLE CENTER STEAL OUR TROLLEY LINE?

Then we printed the story about the trolley line, and what was going on. And we more than hinted that if Eagle Center got a chance it

would do something underhanded to influence the line to go that way. And we pointed out the benefits of the line to Wicksville, and what money it would bring to town, and all that. My! it was a screamer.

Then, inside, we printed an editorial by Mark Tidd, which asked our folks if they wanted anything to do with a town that thought about us the way Eagle Center did. He asked if we wanted to trade with them, or visit with them. He wanted to know why the Board of Trade didn't meet and fix up to boycott Eagle Center, and he ended up by demanding why something wasn't done at once to see to it Wicksville got that trolley line for itself.

You wouldn't believe it, but we ran out of papers before they'd had time to dry, and had to turn to and print some more. Yes, sir, we printed a whole hundred extra, and sold every one of them. Wherever you looked was a man reading the paper, maybe out loud to a crowd. It was funny. Men stood shaking their fists and scowling and making speeches and tearing around like they was crazy. There was some talk of organizing a party to go over to Eagle Center to dare them to fight, but this was overruled.

Anyhow, everybody was mad, and when

Spragg, of the Eagle Center *Clarion*, came out of the hotel and sent his boys to sell papers, the crowd took after him and chased him up to his room, and he didn't dare come down until the town marshal went home and put on his star and then escorted him to the train. Spragg never waited to see what became of his papers, but just went away from there as fast as he could.

I don't believe he was exactly clear why the folks was so turned against him, but he soon found out, all right.

Well, there was a mass meeting, and our folks adopted resolutions paying their respects to Eagle Center and to everybody that lived in it, and they vowed they wouldn't have any dealings with the town or anybody in it. They appointed committees and everything.

Mark and the rest of us were at the meeting, and we got busy getting subscriptions. Civic pride was the tune we played.

"Here," says Mark, "is a paper all our own. It's a b-b-better paper than Eagle Center's. Yet you f-folks let an Eagle Center man come in here and sell that paper of his, and you r-refuse to buy ours. Now's the time to show them. If you mean what you say, why, cut out that Eagle Center paper and dig down for a dollar 'n' a quarter to subscribe for your own."

That was the way he talked, and the rest of us took a leaf out of his book. And it got results, too. That night we took more than fifty subscriptions. Which was pretty good. We thought it had disposed forever of the Eagle Center *Clarion*, but it hadn't. Anyhow, it hadn't disposed of Mr. Spragg, who seemed to have got a grudge against us. He wasn't much of a newspaper man, but as an enemy he did pretty well, so we found out before we were through with him.

CHAPTER X

"WE'VE been sort of neglectin' Rock," says I to Mark Tidd, that evening.

"We have been perty b-busy," says he, "but we better go out to see him to-morrow."

"Fine," says I. "I liked his looks."

"Man With the Black Gloves is in t-town," says Mark.

"When did you see him?" says I.

"He drove in a couple of hours ago."

"Hum!" says I. "He's comin' for somethin'."

"Yes," says Mark, and wrinkled his fat face all up like he was puzzled. "D'you know," says he, "that we don't even know his n-n-name?"

"That's right," says I.

"Nor where he hails from."

"Correct," says I.

"Let's see what we kin find out," says he.

So we went off to the hotel and asked questions, but we didn't find out anything. Seems like the man never stayed there overnight and didn't register. Nobody we could find had

ever spoken to him, and nobody had ever seen him before a week or so ago. He just *was* and that's all we could find out about him.

"T-try the livery stable," says Mark.

"What for?" says I.

"See if anybody there recognizes his horse," says Mark, impatient-like.

Now there was a real idea, and I wished I'd thought of it myself, but I didn't. It took Mark for that. When he missed thinking of a thing it was a pretty foggy day, I tell you.

Over at the livery we didn't get much satisfaction.

"He hain't never drove in with the same horse twict," says the barn-man. "Sometimes it's a gray, and sometimes it's a bay, and last time it was a black."

"Didn't recognize any of 'em?" says Mark.

"Nary," says the man.

And there we were, no better off than we'd been before. If those horses had come from anywheres within ten or fifteen miles of Wicksville that barn-man would have known them, so all we learned was that the Man With the Black Gloves must have come farther than that.

"If we could only trace those horses," says Mark.

"Which way did he come from?" says I.

"Good for you, Binney," says Mark. "That 'll help some, if we can f-f-find out."

We asked around and found out the man drove in from the west. But there was quite a lot of country west of us, as Mark pointed out, reaching right out to the Pacific Ocean, which was a little matter of a couple of thousand miles.

" 'Tain't likely he drove from the Pacific," says I, "and 'tain't likely he drove more 'n twenty-five or thirty mile."

"No," says he, "'tain't. . . . We might as well give *that* up for to-night. I expect Jethro and the Man With the Black Gloves are havin' a m-m-meetin' somewheres."

"How about that puzzle?" says I. "The one about where the cat looks and what color is a brick, and all that stuff."

"I hain't l-looked at it," says he. "Let's see what we can make of it."

He took it out of his pocket and we went to his house and sat down by a lamp.

"'Where pussy looks she walks,' it goes," says Mark. "'Thirty and twenty and ten and forty-six. Stop. Ninety degrees in the shade. In. Down. Across. What color is a brick? Investigate. Believe what tells the truth.' There

she is," says he. "If you can see any sense to it, Binney, you've got me beat."

"Let's take it by chunks," says I. "That first sentence, now. 'Where pussy looks she walks.' What's there to that? Anything?"

"Huh!" says he. "Huh!" And then he went to tugging at his ear and scowling. "If we knew what pussy he was talkin' about we might have some idee."

"But we don't," says I.

"Binney," says he, sober as a judge, but with a twinkle in his little eyes, "I calc'late you're right for once, though how you come to manage it *I* don't know. We sure don't know what cat's bein' d-d-discussed."

"Where she looks she walks," I says. "Oh, rats! it's crazy!"

"If," says Mark, "it means anythin' at all, it's givin' a direction. See? If Mr. Wigglesworth left a message and this is it, why, maybe, just for instance, he'd hid somethin'. Eh? And if he hid somethin', why, he wanted somebody to f-f-find it, but he wanted that s-somebody to be the right p-person."

"Yes," says I, "but who's the right person?"

"Rock," says he.

"How d'you know?" says I.

"B-because," says he, "it was Rock he gave the p-puzzle to."

"All right so far," says I. "But let's git back to pussy and what's she's lookin' at. Most likely it's a bird. Cats is gen'rally lookin' at birds."

"This cat wouldn't be," says he. "It would be l-lookin' somewhere definite, and it would keep l-lookin'. What would be the use sayin' it at all if the cat wouldn't still be lookin' where Mr. Wigglesworth wanted it to when we found her?"

"None," says I, "which makes the whole thing look crazier 'n ever. A cat don't set around eyin' one spot permanent, even if it's a mouse-hole. Cats move around," says I, "and hain't to be depended on."

"I'll bet you this cat is," says he.

"You've got some notion about it," says I.

"Not much of one," says he, "but I'm guessin', for the sake of argument, that Mr. Wigglesworth wanted somebody to find the cat and s-start there and go to walkin' where p-p-pussy looked. See? That would give the direction to go. Go where she looked. If she l-looked south, walk south. If she l-looked north, walk north."

"So far so good," says I. "Go on."

"The next looks easy. 'Stop,' it says. Well, 'stop' means to quit w-walkin', don't it?"

"Yes," says I, "but you're leavin' out somethin'."

"What?" says he.

"Why," says I, "the 'Thirty and twenty and ten and forty-six.'"

"To be sure," says he. He thought some more, and so did I.

"Maybe," says I, "them figures means letters of the alphabet. A would be 1, and B would be 2, and so on. Let's try it."

We did, but nothing came of it. It didn't make a word of sense.

"'Tain't that," says Mark, "but I'll tell you what I b-b-b'lieve it *is*."

"What?" says I.

"Feet," says he.

"Whose feet?" says I.

"Feet," says he, sharp-like. "Measure. Twelve-inch feet."

"Oh," says I.

"Yes," says he, his cheeks flushing a little and his eyes getting all shiny with excitement. "That must be it. It means to start where the cat is and walk where she looks thirty and twenty and ten and forty-six feet. How many's t-that?"

"Thirty and twenty's fifty, and ten is sixty and forty-six is a hunderd and six," says I.

"Good enough," says he. "We're so far in no time at all. We f-find pussy, makin' sure we got the *right* pussy, and we take note of where she's l-lookin' and we walk that way a hunderd and six f-feet. . . . Then what do we do?" says he, with a grin.

"We stop," says I. "It says it on this paper, but it didn't need to. We're stopped, anyhow, by what comes next."

"What does come next?"

"'Ninety degrees in the shade,'" says I.

"Perty hot," says he.

"Does it mean we got to look for a spot that's as warm as that?"

"Don't b'lieve it," says he. "No spot's n-ninety degrees in the shade around here *always*. To be any good for what Mr. Wigglesworth's got in mind, a spot would *always* have to be ninety in the shade. Or else there'd have to be somethin' to tell just when to look. See? If he's given directions to find somethin', I think those directions are good every d-day and every hour of the day."

"That's l-likely," says I. "If we only knew he *was* givin' directions," says I, "we could git along better."

"As for me," says he, "I'm s-s-sure of it."

"That settles it, then," says I, gettin' a little sarcastic.

While we were arguing about it there was a clanging and banging out in the yard like a dozen kids were knocking tin pans together, and we heard somebody set up a holler.

"Hey! inside there! Hey! Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd, are you at home?"

"It's Zadok," says I, and we ran to the door.

Sure enough, there was old Zadok Biggs, the tin peddler, who was such a good friend of ours. Zadok was about half a man high and a man and a half wide, with the soberest, most serious-looking face you ever saw. He traveled all over the State in his red wagon, swapping tinware with wimmen for old rags.

"Come in, Zadok," Mark called, and in he came.

"Ha!" says he. "My friend Marcus Aurelius. Remarkable boy, remarkable name. Where's your ma and pa? Extraordinary folks. No ordinary ma and pa would have picked out such a name. Live up to it," says Zadok Biggs. "And there's Binney Jenks, too. Howdy, Binney?"

"Fine," says I, "and how's yourself?"

"Excellent," says he, "or, to put it in plain language, very well indeed. What have you boys been accomplishing? Accomplishing is an elegant word. I love to use it. Most folks would say 'doing.'"

"We're runnin' a newspaper," says I. "At least Mark is, and the rest of us are helping."

"Newspaper. Ha! Splendid! Molding public opinion. I, Zadok Biggs, might have been a great editor, though nature fitted me to be a judge. What newspaper?"

"The Wicksville *Trumpet*," says Mark.

"Splendid! Extraordinary! Are you making money? Do the folks appreciate a good periodical—paper is the commoner term?"

"Some d-does and some doesn't," says Mark.

"Ha! Not going as well as would be wished. Talk it over with Zadok. Tell Zadok your troubles. Maybe there will be a resultant benefit. Good words, those. Another man would say that maybe good would come of it, but Zadok Biggs has seen life and studied life, and he knows words. Perhaps I will be able to point out an opportunity. Opportunities are my specialty."

"You b-bet they are," says Mark, and I agreed with him, for Zadok had helped us out more than once before.

"Opportunity!" says Zadok. "A fine word and means a fine thing. What is an opportunity? Means something like a chance, only better. An opportunity is something you take hold of and hang onto and it leads you ahead. Always ahead. Opportunities never hold you back. Some folks say there aren't opportunities, but they don't know. If they rode all over the State on top of my wagon they would know. I know. I see 'em. Everywhere I see opportunities, and I see folks missing them. Yes, sir, missing opportunities that would make something of them. Why? Because they're lazy, or because they want somebody to help them instead of helping themselves, or because they haven't eyes to see. But I don't take much stock in that. Anybody has eyes to see. What they lack is ambition to git up and hustle. Am I right?"

"You are," says Mark.

"Marcus Aurelius Fortunatus Tidd does not let his opportunities slip. I have seen him catch them by the tail. Oh, many times I have seen him, and Binney, too, and Plunk and Tallow. Don't be impatient. While I talk I think, I look about to see if there is an opportunity running at large. An opportunity for boys running a newspaper. Ha!"

He stopped and scratched his head, and whistled "Marching Through Georgia," and got up and walked out to the dining-room, where he yelled at Mr. Tidd and Mark's mother, and talked to them awhile. Then he came back and says:

"How does a paper make money? Subscribers, say I, and advertising. How do you get subscribers? First by having a good paper they'll want to read. I can trust you to do that. Mark Tidd would have no other kind. Advertising? There may be advertising your experience has not made you aware of. That you don't know about would be the vulgar way of expressing it. And Zadok Biggs knows of such advertising. It pays. There is money in it."

"Good," says Mark. "What is it?"

"County advertisin'," says Zadok. "Things the law requires the county to have published in a newspaper. Like accounts and audits and proceedings and such. Advertise for bids generally, and the paper that bids lowest gets the work. For a year, mostly. And now's the time."

"Mostly goes to politicians, don't it?" says Mark.

"Yes," says Zadok, "but there 's an opportunity for other folks—for Mark Tidd and his

friends. If I was them I'd go to the county-seat, and I'd see the county authorities and I'd argue with 'em. Yes, sir, and I'll bet I'd get that business. I'd surprise 'em. That's what I'd do."

"When is the contract g-given out?" says Mark.

"Next week," says Zadok.

"Then," says Mark, "you can expect to see Binney and me h-headin' for the county-seat about the day after to-morrow."

"Why not to-morrow?" says Zadok. "Opportunities don't perch long. You got to get 'em before they flit."

So we told him we had to see Rock to-morrow and why and all about it, and he agreed with us. "Let's see that cryptogram," says he. "You know what cryptogram means, eh?"

"Yes," says Mark, and handed him the writing and told him what we had made out of it. As far as we had gone he agreed with us, but couldn't go any farther.

"About that Man With the Black Gloves," says he. "I'll keep an eye out for him. Comes from the West, does he? I'll watch. Zadok goes many places and sees many folks. Perhaps I will see him. Now," says he, "is there a piece of apple pie and a glass of milk and a bed for me."

"You bet," says Mark, so we all had a lunch that Mrs. Tidd got for us, like she always does whenever anybody is there, and I went home. I promised to be there bright and early to go out to Rock's with Mark.

CHAPTER XI

MARK was around at my house, whistling for me, before I was through breakfast, so I gobbled down my last four pancakes and hustled out. He had another lunch as big as a trunk, so it was safe to say we wouldn't starve before noon.

About a half a mile from the Wigglesworth place we saw a buggy coming toward us like the horse was running away, but it wasn't. A man was driving, and the man was Jethro. When he saw us he pulled up so short he almost snapped his horse's head off, which was mighty poor driving.

"Hey!" says he. "Seen a kid down that way anywheres?"

"L-lots of 'em," says Mark.

"Don't git fresh," says Jethro.

"I wasn't," says Mark. "I was t-t-tellin' the truth."

"Did you see a kid," says Jethro, "that looked like he was runnin' away?"

"How does a kid l-look that's runnin' away?" Mark asked.

Jethro reached for the whip like he had intentions of taking a lick at us, but he changed his mind.

"You know all the kids in Wicksville," says he. "This was a strange one—one you hain't never seen before. See sich a one?"

"No," says Mark. "What's he runnin' away for?"

" 'Cause he's a ongrateful little skunk," says Jethro. "If you see any strange kids sort of hidin' around, you tell me and I'll give you a dollar."

"You're Mr. Wigglesworth's man, hain't you?" says Mark, like he didn't know.

"Yes," says Jethro.

"Didn't know you had a b-boy," says Mark.

"He wasn't mine. I was sort of guardian over him."

"Oh!" says Mark. "And he's run off and you want us to help you f-find him?"

Jethro didn't say anything for a minute, but thought it over. Then he says to himself something about kids being all over creation and seeing everything that goes on. After that he says to us:

"You kids make a business of lookin' for this

runaway, and I'll pay you five dollars if you find him."

"Why don't you advertise?" says Mark, and at that Jethro looked sort of startled.

"Look here," says he, "no advertisin' goes. This is a secret between you and me. See? You hain't to talk about it to anybody or you don't get no five dollars."

"Mum's the word," says Mark.

"You report to me at Wigglesworth's house," says Jethro, "if you find out anything."

"All right," says Mark, and off drove Jethro. When he was gone Mark turned and winked at me.

"Hired by the enemy," says he. "Now there's a way we can get into the Wigglesworth grounds and house any t-t-time we want to without makin' Jethro suspicious."

"Sure," says I, "but what's this runaway business? Has Rock run off?"

"It l-looks that way," says Mark.

"What for?" says I.

"How should I know?" says Mark. "Let's head for the arbor and see if he's left a l-letter."

We ducked off the road and slid up the hedge. This time Mark was too interested in what was really happening to do any pretending about dukes or knights, so we just sneaked along like

a couple of boys till we got to the arbor, and wriggled through the hedge. There was a letter in the hiding-place.

DEAR FRIEND [the letter said], I'm going away. I don't like it here because Jethro keeps getting meaner and meaner, and watches me all the time like I was in jail, and won't let me do anything. I won't stand it. Jethro isn't anything to me, and neither is that man with black gloves that comes and scowls at me and asks a lot of questions. I'm going off to China or Florida or the South Sea Islands or some place, so most likely I'll never see you again.

I don't know what I was brought to this place for. If anybody has a right to make me stay, why doesn't he say so? I might as well be in jail. I guess I can earn a living, all right. Maybe I'll go to Alaska and dig gold. Maybe I'll write to you some day.

Yours truly,

ROCK.

"H'm!" says Mark. "He's g-goin' a lot of places, hain't he?"

"Wisht I was goin' with him," says I. "The South Sea Islands sounds fine."

"But it's quite a walk," says Mark, "especially when you think about crossin' the Pacific Ocean to get there."

"He'd stow away on a vessel?" says I.

"Shucks!" says he. "Rock won't get twenty m-miles from Wicksville."

"Bet he does," says I.

"Shucks!" says Mark again. "We got to

f-find him, and I hain't goin' to look in Alaska, nor Florida, either."

"You hain't goin' to give him up to Jethro, be you?"

"That," says he, "is exactly what I'm goin' to do."

"Mark Tidd," says I, "I wouldn't 'a' thought it. For five dollars you'd squeal on this poor kid that's in a peck of trouble. Well," says I, getting madder and madder, "you can hunt for him alone. I won't have anything to do with it. It's a dirty trick," says I.

"Binney," says Mark, "l-look out or you'll bile out of your shirt. Keep it on," says he. "How many d-dirty tricks have you seen me play on folks?"

"None," says I, "but that don't stop this from bein' one."

He just grinned as good-natured as could be.

"You're foolin'," says I.

"No," says he, "I mean it."

"You'll give up Rock to them men?"

"Yes," says he, "if I f-f-find him."

"Then," says I, "you and me is through. We been perty good friends, and we've done a heap of things together, and I guess I figgered you was almost as great a man as Napoleon Bonaparte, but you hain't. I hain't as smart as you," says

I, "but you can bet I don't go givin' away any kids that's in trouble. You go look for him," says I, "and I'll go look for him. But I won't be tellin' on him if I find him. I'll warn him," says I.

"Binney," says Mark, "you're a n-noble young man right out of a book. Honest you are. You're a hero," says he.

"I hain't," says I.

"L-look here, you saphead," says he, "have some sense. I'm goin' to git Rock back into Jethro's hands," says he, "but not to help Jethro. We *got* to have him back here. How we g-g-goin' to find out about him if he's run away? Tell me that. There's somethin' mighty mysterious and important about him. Jethro and the Man With the Black Gloves hain't d-doin' all they're up to just for fun, be they? Not by a jugful. Rock had ought to have known b-better than to go sneakin' off, but I s'pose he got l-lonesome. Poor kid! But lonesome or not, he's got to come b-back."

I felt pretty silly and didn't think of anything to say.

"Come on," says Mark.

"Where?" says I.

"To l-look for Rock," says he.

"Where'll we look?"

"Well," says he, "if you was Rock and was r-r-runnin' away, where'd you go?"

"South Sea Islands," says I.

He just grunted scornful-like. "Which way would you g-g-go first?"

"Right to the depot," says I, "and take a train."

"How'd you pay for your t-ticket? Rock didn't have a cent."

That was a facer. "Then I'd steal a ride on a freight," says I.

"No you wouldn't," says he. "You wouldn't go toward t-town at all. Jethro was watchin' you close. You had to sneak away in a s-second when he wasn't lookin'. How'd you m-manage it?"

"Why," says I, "I'd git near the gate gradual, and then I'd run like the dickens."

"You wouldn't, n-n-neither—especial if you wanted to leave a l-letter. I'll tell you what Rock did. He got hold of p-p-paper and pencil and pocketed 'em. Then he went out in the yard and walked around. You see how he did the other day when we came here first. He hain't any n-ninny. Well, he'd walk around the yard and after a while he'd c-c-come into this arbor. For t-two reasons. To leave the letter he was goin' to write, and to get time to hustle

off to quite a d-distance before Jethro suspected he was escapin'."

"How's that?" says I.

"Why," says he, "Jethro'd s-see Rock come in here, and he'd think he knew where he was. He wouldn't come p-pokin' in to see. So Rock would write his l-letter in a hurry, and scrooch out through the hedge and run. All the t-time Jethro'd be thinkin' he was right in here. Maybe it would b-be an hour before he'd begin to wonder what Rock was up to so l-long and come in to see. In an hour Rock could move off quite a ways."

"Sure," says I, "but where'd he move to?"

"He'd git away from the road," says Mark. "He wouldn't take the road t-toward Wicksville, and he wouldn't go the other way, and he wouldn't cross the road and go s-south, because somebody might see him when he crossed. There hain't but one other way for him to go, and that's n-north toward the r-river and the woods. That's where he went."

"Sounds likely," I says.

"It's sure," says he. "He got through the hedge and took a l-look and seen those woods right there. Then he made for 'em lickety-split."

"When did he go?" says I. "The letter didn't say."

"This m-mornin'," says Mark. "Jethro was all excited. Didn't he act that way? Like he'd just found out Rock was gone? Sure he did. He acted like he was most r-rattled to pieces, and the first thing he did was to hitch a horse and go f-flyin' off wild-like, just lookin' for the sake of lookin'. Anyhow, Jethro hain't got many brains. Yes, Binney, you can bet Jethro just f-found it out."

"Then," says I, "Rock hain't been gone more 'n an hour or two."

"That's how I f-f-figger," says he.

"Come on, then," says I, "he's got quite a start."

We streaked it along till we got out of the field and into the woods. Maybe you think because Mark Tidd is fat that he can't move. Well you'd get fooled there, for though there's enough of him for two boys and their little brother rolled into one, he can get from one place to another about as fast as the next one. I've read those rhinoceroses and hippopotamuses in Africa are pretty whopping animals, but that when they get started they can run to beat a horse. I don't know if it's so, but Mark Tidd sort of leads me to believe it.

Right in the edge of the woods Mark stopped and picked up a cap.

"There," says he.

"Rock's?" says I.

"He was wearin' it when I saw it l-last," says he.

"Must 'a' been in a hurry, not to pick it up."

"P-panic," says Mark. "He got to runnin' across the f-field and then got scairt. It works that way. Once you start to run, the idee gits into your head s-somebody's chasin' you hard. I'll bet Rock thought Jethro was right onto his heels. He didn't stop for anythin'."

"Hope he hain't runnin' yet," says I.

"Can't tell," says Mark, "but I was right about the way he went, eh?"

You see, when he did a thing that was pretty bright he liked to have folks tell him so. Not that he was what you'd call vain. He wasn't, and he wasn't all excited about himself, either, but he was funny that way, and I guess we liked him all the better on account of it. So I told him he was right about it, and that it was a good job of figgering things out. And I was telling him what was so, too, for it *was* a good job. I wouldn't have thought out what Rock had done in forty years.

We cut straight through the woods to the river, but when we came to it we stopped, for we didn't know whether Rock went up-stream or down, or waded across.

"He didn't wade," says Mark, "b-because he

don't know this river. It l-looks like it might be deep out there, and the current's swift. He wouldn't tackle it."

"I guess not," says I, "but which way did he go?"

"That," says Mark, "is what we got to f-find out. Maybe he didn't come right down to the river at all, but I think he did."

"Why?" says I.

"To see if he couldn't get across. He'd f-feel safer with a river between him and Jethro. But he didn't cross here. It looks dangerous. Either he went up or down, and I think close to the water, searchin' for a place to cross."

"It's perty soft along here for quite a ways," says I. "Maybe we can find footprints."

"You go up," says Mark, "and I'll go down. Holler if you f-f-find anythin'."

I went off like he said, pretending I was an Indian. Maybe a couple of hunderd feet upstream I came on a place where somebody had walked right down to the edge of the river, because there in the mud were tracks filled with water. The place was tramped up quite a bit, and there were tracks leading back away from the river toward the bluff and the trees.

I yelled at Mark and he turned and came.

We followed the tracks part way up the bluff

and then they turned up-stream, going along among the trees. Then, all of a sudden, they went up the bank again and turned right back down-stream the way they'd come from, and then they went higher till they came to a rail fence right along the edge of the bluff and among the trees. From that minute we couldn't find another track.

"Huh!" says Mark, after a couple of minutes. "Rock's all right. Know what he did?"

"No," says I. "What?"

"Got on top of the fence and went along. Maybe took off his shoes, because the t-top rail hain't scratched up anywheres. Figgered he wouldn't leave any trail. What with his doublin' back and f-f-forth, we don't know which way he's aimin'. Maybe he went up and maybe he went down. He's a good one, all right."

"Too good for us," says I, sort of discouraged.

"Huh!" says Mark, like he didn't like my saying that very well.

"What 'll we do?" says I.

"Eat," says he, "and then hunt both ways. Separate like we did below."

"All right," says I, and that's what we did. But not a sign had either of us seen of him when we met at the office just before supper-time. Rock had just naturally up and disappeared.

CHAPTER XII

WE had to forget about Rock for the next day, anyhow, and go to the county-seat to see about that political printing. It was two hours' ride on the train, but we enjoyed that and made use of it planning how we'd go to work to land the business. At least Mark planned and I listened while he did it. But, somehow or other, the plans we made weren't the ones we carried out. Not by a long shot. If they had been Mark wouldn't have been as famous in the State as he is to-day among men that follow up politics for a living, and among newspaper men.

No, the plans we carried out were other plans altogether, and they were made in a lot less than two hours. I should say they were.

We got off the train and went up to the court-house. At the door stood a lot of men smoking and loafing and talking, and we walked up to them and wanted to know where we'd find the

man that gave out the county printing to the newspapers.

A couple of them winked at each other and said we'd better see the judge of probate, who took care of orphans and lunatics and such, and I expected to hear Mark come right back at him with something hot. But he didn't. Afterward he said to me:

"Binney, when you're on b-business don't let anythin' mix up with it. If you git grudges ag'in' folks s-s-save 'em up for some other day. Some feller may say somethin' smart to you and git a l-lot of fun out of it. If you take him d-down off'n his high horse it 'll sour him quick—and that very man may be the f-feller whose scalp you're after."

"Shucks!" says I.

"It's easier to git what you want out of a man that's f-f-feelin' good," says he, "and there hain't no way to make a man feel g-good that beats lettin' him think he's awful smart. If you let him make a j-joke on you, why, he sort of feels friendly 'cause you've helped him show his friends what a w-w-whale of a feller he is. And then you git easier s-sailin'."

"Maybe so," says I; "that's figgerin' too far ahead for me. If somebody says somethin' fresh to me and I kin think of somethin' to

say back, why, you can bet your hat I'm goin' to pop it right at him."

"And l-lose money by it," says he.

"Money hain't the whole thing," says I.

"It is," says he, "when it's money you're *after*. When you start out f-for a thing you want to git it, don't you, whether it's m-money or apples or f-freckles on your nose? It hain't the money that's important; it's *gittin'* it."

That was Mark Tidd all over. If he made up his mind he was after a thing he stuck to it till he got it, or till it was put where it was a sure thing he couldn't touch it. It wasn't so much that he wanted the *thing*, whatever it was; it was that he was bound to do what he set out to do. He might figure and work a week to get some old thing, and then turn right around and give it to you. It was just the being able to *get* it that interested *him*.

So he didn't say a word back to the man that joked him—that is, not a word that was smart. He just says, "We hain't got any orphans or l-lunatics on hand this m-mornin', but we'd like mighty well to see that printin' feller."

He was so all-fired polite about it that somebody spoke up and says, "There's a couple of 'em you'll have to deal with, sonny. Feller named Brown and another feller named Wiggins,

and they hain't what you could call friends, neither. You hain't like to find 'em roostin' in the same bush. Both of them's inside somewheres. If you find a feller skinnier 'n a beanpole and along about nine feet high, with red hair on top of him, why, that's Wiggins. If you run ag'in' a feller equal skinny and equal tall without no hair at all, why, that's Brown. You can't mistake either of 'em."

"Much obliged," says Mark, and in we went.

We poked around quite a spell, going one place and another, but we didn't see any tall, thin men, till we got onto the second floor and walked up to some doors that were standing open, and looked in. It was a court-room. We knew that right off because there was a high place built up for the judge in front, and a pen for the jury and lots of seats. Nothing was going on at all, and we were coming out again when we heard a sort of murmur like folks were talking low and confidential.

"'S-s-sh!" says Mark, who was always cautious till he found out where he stood. Then he craned his neck, and 'way back in the shadows were two men, one standing and the other sitting, and the standing man was so tall and thin he could have got a job in a circus. The

sitting man was thin, with a bunch of carroty hair.

"Brown and Wiggins," says Mark, drawing back quick.

"Come on in, then," says I.

"Nix," says he. "L-let's think. . . . Man said they wasn't friends, didn't he, and that we wasn't likely to f-f-find 'em together?"

"Yes," says I.

"Then," says he, "if folks that know 'em f-figger they wouldn't be together, it's sort of f-f-funny to find 'em hobnobbin', hain't it?"

"Why," says I, "I calc'late it is."

"And them b-bein' politicians, it's f-funnier 'n ever," says he.

"To be sure," says I.

"Politicians," says he, "is said to be s-s-slippery."

"My dad says so."

"Then," says he, "l-lookin' at this from all sides, a man up a t-tree would figger them fellers was up to somethin', eh?"

"Shouldn't wonder," says I, "but what of it?"

"And they've s-sneaked off and hid to talk," says he to himself.

"None of our business," says I.

"Newspaper men, hain't we?"

"Yes," says I.

"Sellin' advertisin' to the county to-day?"

"Yes," says I.

"Then," says he, "whatever those f-fellers do is mighty int'restin' to me."

"All right," says I. "What of it?"

"I'm f-figgerin'," says he, "on how we could git to l-listen a little to what they was sayin'."

"Eavesdroppin'," says I, scornful-like.

"When men is up to a game and s-sneaks off to p-plan it," he says, "it's not eavesdroppin' to listen. They git what's comin' to 'em."

"Have it that way, then," says I.

"But," says he, "g-gittin' so's we can listen hain't so easy. Let's go outside and look around."

We went, and as we walked down-stairs Mark says, "The p'litical fight in this county this fall is over the sheriff."

"I know it," says I.

"Then," says he, "if two men that's p'litical enemies is seen hobnobbin', most likely the sheriff's got somethin' to do with it. Bowman's the man that's got the job now, and Whittaker wants to git the Republican nomination away from him. Now, takin' for granted that pow-wow up there's about the sheriff, why, what be they d-doin' about it?"

"How should I know?" says I.

We stopped a minute at the door, and Mark says, "How's the fight for sheriff gettin' on?"

"Perty hot," says a man—"perty almighty hot."

"Brown's for Bowman, hain't he?" says Mark.

"No," says the man; "where'd you git that idee? He's strong for Whittaker."

"How's Wiggins?"

"Nobody knows, but fellers that pertends to be wise figgers he's for Bowman—jest so's to be for anybody Brown is against."

"Huh!" says Mark. "What d'you calc'late 'u'd happen if Brown and Wiggins was to make up f-friends and work for the same man?"

"It couldn't happen," says the man, "but if it did, with the batch of delegates each one of 'em controls in the convention, the man they agreed on would have a walk-away."

"Hum!" says Mark. "Is Brown awful strong for Whittaker?"

"Whittaker's best friend he's got. Why, Whittaker lent him the money to go into business first, and has always been befriendin' him, and two year ago Brown up and married Whittaker's sister."

"So," says Mark, "there hain't much danger of his switchin' to Bowman?"

"He jest *couldn't*," says the man.

"Hum!" says Mark. "Int'restin' to hear. Much obliged, mister."

We walked on, and all of a sudden Mark chuckled right out. "Binney," says he, "we don't need to go listenin' to what those f-f-fellers is talkin' about. I know."

"Shucks!" says I.

"Wait and see," says he. "We'll walk around a while and then go back and see Wiggins."

Which we did. In half an hour we went back, and after looking around a spell we found Wiggins in his office. In we went.

"Howdy-do, Mr. Wiggins!" says Mark, "I'm Mark Tidd, of Wicksville, and this is Binney Jenks."

"Glad to meet you," says Mr. Wiggins. "What can I do for you?"

"Why," says Mark, "we come on b-business. I'm editor of the Wicksville *Trumpet*," he says, "and the Wicksville *Trumpet* needs some good steady advertisin'. So," says he, "we come to see if we couldn't git the c-county p-printin' for the next year."

"H'm!" says Mr. Wiggins, his eyes twinkling like he wanted to laugh. "Juvenile paper? Amateur editor?"

"Not any," says Mark. "Reg'lar weekly," and he showed Mr. Wiggins a copy.

"Mean to say you boys are running this?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," says Mark.

"Well," says Mr. Wiggins, "the way this printing is given out, the papers that want it make bids telling how much the county will have to pay, and then the bids are opened and the job goes to the lowest."

"Sure," says Mark, "that's the gen'ral idee of it, but," he says, "most gen'ally the f-feller gits it that's got the most p'litical pull, don't he, honest Injun?"

Mr. Wiggins laughed. "Well," he said, "maybe politics does have something to do with it. If you think that, what made you come?"

"Because," says Mark, "Binney and me is p-politicians, and we got pull."

"Oh," says Mr. Wiggins. "What influence have you to bring to bear?"

"Why," says Mark, "we sort of f-f-figger on *yours*, and on Mr. Brown's."

Mr. Wiggins laughed right out. "Don't you know," says he, "that Brown and I don't live in the same nest at all? You couldn't get the two of us to agree on anything to save your life. And, besides, I never saw you or heard of you

before. How do you figure you have *my* influence?"

"Because," says Mark, "we calc'late to be reg'lar p-politicians and see farther into what's goin' on than m-most folks, and because you want us on your side a l-little worse 'n you want 'most anybody else in the county."

"Now look here, sonny," says Mr. Wiggins, "I'm pretty busy, and, while I like boys and am willing to fool with 'em, to-day I'm short of time. Come in some other day."

"Wait a m-minute," says Mark, "till we tell you how we size up this here sheriff fight." He didn't wait for Wiggins to say he could, but jumped right into it.

"This here is the hardest f-f-fight for sheriff in years," says he, "and anybody that b-beats out Bowman's got a job on his hands, eh?"

"Yes," says Wiggins.

"And f-folks gen'ally think you're for Bowman, don't they?"

"Yes."

"And so his side's restin' easier in their minds?"

"Some," says Wiggins.

"Well, then," says Mark, "s'posin' I was to p-print a story in my paper sayin' that the row between you and Brown was made up, and that

you and Brown had met and hobnobbed and that you'd agreed, for some reason or another, to wait till the convention and, when the f-fight got good and hot, to make the d-delegates you control vote, not for Bowman, but for Whittaker? Folks 'u'd be int'rested in that story, eh?"

"Say, kid," says Wiggins, jumping up onto his feet, "who sent you here?"

"Nobody," says Mark. "We just come after the p-printin'."

"What you say is bosh," says Wiggins.

"It's *so*," says Mark, "and we know it's so, and you know it's so. What," says he, "if you was overheard t-talkin' up in the court-room awhile ago?"

Mr. Wiggins sort of caved in. "You haven't told anybody?"

''Course not. Sich p'litical information hain't much good when you give it away."

"My dad's for Whittaker, anyhow," says I.

"So's mine," says Mark, "but politics is politics. How about your influence, Mr. Wiggins?"

"You get it," says Wiggins, sharp-like. "Go tell Brown to go up to the court-room."

We did that, and Brown was pretty surprised, but he went. We followed along, and there was Wiggins waiting for us. He told Brown what

Mark had said to him, and Brown began to laugh as hard as he could, and then got serious.

"You win, kids," says he, "providin' you can keep quiet."

"We git the p-printin'?"

"You do," says Brown, "but how Wiggins and I will explain it to certain newspaper men, particularly the Eagle Center *Clarion*, I don't know."

"Was the Eagle Center *Clarion* goin' to git it?" says I.

"They figured on it pretty strongly," says Mr. Brown.

And that's how we landed the county printing. It was all by Mark Tidd's using his brains. All he needed was a hint, and he reasoned the thing right out, and it was so like he reasoned it. It made Mark pretty famous with politicians before it was all done, for after the convention, when Whittaker got the nomination, the story leaked out, and everybody laughed at Brown and Wiggins, and when folks found out Mark hadn't really heard a thing, but just jumped at conclusions and made a bluff, they laughed harder than ever.

That was all right, but what really counted was that we got a dandy piece of business that paid well and gave the paper a lot of reputation

and standing around the county. It got us a lot of subscribers, too, because there are folks that have to read about the county proceedings.

Mr. Wiggins took us to dinner and made a lot of us, and didn't hold a grudge at all. After that we caught the train and went home, feeling like we had done a pretty good day's work.

CHAPTER XIII

THE first thing we did when we got home was to hunt up Plunk and Tallow to find out if anything had been heard of Rock, but he was still just as missing as ever—and even more so.

"Well," says Mark, "we got to f-find him, and find him quick. We need him in our business and he needs us in hisn."

"You hain't goin' to give him up to Jethro like you said—honest, are you?"

"You b-b-bet I am," says Mark, and there was an end to that.

"To-morrow mornin'," says he, "you f-f-fellows be at my house at five o'clock, and we'll git after him. I got an idee," says he.

"Five o'clock," says I. "What's the use of goin' to bed at all?"

Mark he sort of grinned and says: "This Rock business is a sort of s-s-side issue with us. What we're doin' for a livin' is run a newspaper —and we got to give consid'able time to it."

That was Mark Tidd all over. Business was

first. He could tend to business more and harder than any kid I ever heard of.

Next morning we were on hand when Mark said, and off we started toward the place where we lost track of Rock. Mark was as sure as ever he was some place close around. "Bet I can p-prove it pretty quick," says he, "and after I've proved it I bet I can go straight to where he's asleep this minute."

"Shucks!" says I.

"Will you eat a r-rotten apple if I can't?" says Mark.

Well, I knew him pretty well, and when he talked like that he was pretty sure he knew what he was talking about, so I sort of backed down as easy as I could. He didn't say anything, but just grinned aggravating.

There was just one farm out that way, and Mark headed us in the yard and around to the barn, where Mr. Soggs was milking.

"'Mornin', Mr. Soggs," says he.

"Up kinder early, hain't ye?" says Mr. Soggs.

"Ketchin' worms," says Mark. "Say, Mr. Soggs, been missin' anythin' around here l-l-lately?"

"How'd you know?" says Soggs. "You boys hain't campin' out around here, be ye? 'Cause

if ye be, and it's you that's been a-pesterin' my wife, stealin' pies off'n the winder-sill and sich, I'll have the law on ye."

"Not guilty," says Mark. "What was stolen?"

"A hull apple pie 'n' a hunk of ham 'n' half a loaf of bread."

"Too bad," says Mark, but I could see a twinkle in those little eyes of his. "Hope it didn't spoil your meal, Mr. Soggs."

"I managed," says Soggs, "I managed."

"To be sure," says Mark. "Well, we'll be movin' on. G'by, Mr. Soggs."

"G'by to ye," says he, and off we went.

"There," says Mark when we were out of hearing. "Now what you got to say?"

"Same's ever," says I. "What's a missin' pie got to do with Rock?"

"Rock et that pie," says Mark.

"Fiddle-de-dee," says I, but I wasn't so sure about it. Mark he acted so *certain*.

"Now," says he, "we'll go and g-get him."

He started off like he knew exactly where he was going, and we followed. He led us along the bluff above the river for a spell, and then started down. In a minute I saw where we were. We were just across from Butternut Island, and right above our old cave—the cave

where Mark and Tallow hid Mr. Tidd's turbine a long while back, and where Sammy, the half-breed Injun, used to live.

"Bet he hain't there," says I. "He couldn't ever find it."

"He must 'a' found it," says Mark, "because he's in it right now."

"How d'you know?" says I.

"Because," says he, with another aggravating grin, "there hain't no other place for him to be."

Well, down we went, quiet-like, and peeked in the cave. It was pretty dark there, but all the same we could see something. It looked like somebody asleep, and Mark he grinned at me again.

"You sneaked up here and found him," says I.

"Didn't," says he; "jest figgered it out—and there he is."

He was that proud of himself just then that you couldn't touch him with a giraffe's neck.

"Rock," he called, soft-like, "Rock."

Rock jumped up so sudden he was like to have busted his head against the cave roof, and looked around scared.

"It's Mark Tidd and the f-f-fellers," says Mark. "Come on out."

"How'd you find me?" says Rock, after he'd got over being scared and surprised.

"Well," says Mark, "I knew you must be somewheres around, because you couldn't of got away. You'd be seen or somethin'. We followed you to the river and then lost your tracks, so I knew you were perty clost to here, hidin'. This is the only good hidin'-place for a long ways, so I f-figgered you *had* to be here—and here you are."

"Glad Jethro hasn't as much brains as you have, Mark."

"Why?"

"Because he'd have found me, instead of you."

"But," says Mark, "we're a-goin' to take you back to him."

Rock just looked at him.

"L-look here," says Mark, "you got to trust us if we're goin' to do you any good. And I'll tell you this, that with you gone there hain't the least chance of ever findin' out about you. You got to *be* there. . . . I shouldn't wonder if the Man With the Black Gloves would be t-tickled to death, when he got to thinkin' it over, if you was to run away and he never heard of you again. You're a-goin' back there because that's where you can do yourself the most

good and those f-fellers the most harm. See it?"

"I see your idea," says Rock, "but it don't look very pleasant."

"Neither does l-livin' in a cave and eat'n' stolen pie look very good," says Mark.

"But—" says Rock.

"Either you go back with us or we quit the whole b-b-business," says Mark. "We're goin' to let on to Jethro that we captured you, and he'll pay us money. And he'll think you hate us, if you act right, and he'll trust us so's we'll get a chance to nose around a little. I'm mighty curious," says he, "about that cat that Mr. Wigglesworth wrote about, and where it's lookin', and why; and I'd like a chance to l-l-look for it."

"Maybe you're right," says Rock.

"Course I am," says Mark.

"All right," says Rock, "but it isn't very pleasant being shut up and watched and treated like they've treated me."

"It won't l-l-last long," says Mark. "Come on."

We started back, with Rock looking pretty dubious over his prospects. If he had known Mark Tidd as well as we did he wouldn't have felt so much that way, though I'll admit *I*

JETHRO JUST *RUSHED* AT US AND GRABBED A HOLT OF ROCK, ROUGH-LIKE

wouldn't have been tickled to death if I'd been in his place.

It didn't take us a great while to get back to the farm with Rock, and there was Jethro walking up and down and growling and acting pretty anxious. When he saw us turn in the yard with Rock he just *rushed* at us and grabbed a-holt of Rock, rough-like.

"Hey, there!" says Mark. "G-go easy."

Jethro looked at him a second and let right go, and then began to grin. "I guess," says he, "that you kids have earned your money," and he passed it over.

"Now," says he to Rock, "what you mean by runnin' off, eh? Had a perty time of it, hain't you? Well, you let me ketch you tryin' it again, and you'll wisht you'd been shut up in a cage like a monkey in a circus. You bet you will."

"G-got anythin' to eat around this p-place?" says Mark.

Jethro looked Mark over and laughed right out. Not the kind of laugh a fellow likes, but a noisy, bossy kind of a laugh. "You look like you gen'ally got plenty," says he.

"I do," says Mark, short as could be, because he don't like to have folks talking about his weight. Then he winked at Jethro and got him off to one side.

"Say," he says, "that kid's goin' to slip away s-s-sure," says he, "if he hain't watched. *You* can't do it right, but us fellers can. What you say to givin' us a job guardin' him? We'll see he's kept here till it's time for him to go somewheres else."

Jethro scratched his chin and thought it over.

"How much?" says he.

"Fifty c-cents a day," says Mark. "One of us 'll be here all the t-time."

"Good," says Jethro. "I'll jest take you up on that. Keep your eye on him clost. Don't let him git out of this yard."

"Don't worry," says Mark. "Now how about s-s-somethin' to eat?"

Jethro went in and brought us out some pie and a fried-cake apiece—the bakery kind. They weren't very good, but we managed to get away with them, and then Jethro went about his business, having been fooled good by Mark, and depending on him to keep his eye on Rock.

When he was gone Mark says to Rock, "Now you s-s-see why we wanted to f-fetch you back? We got the job w-watchin' you, and we can be with you all we want, and we can s-s-snoop around this place as much as we want to. And I can tell you I've got a heap of snoopin' to do.

And we can see to it that nothin' happens to you, for one of us will be here all the time."

"Mark Tidd," says Rock, "you're all right. You've got more brains in your little finger than I have in my head."

Mark sort of threw up his head and pushed out his chest, and his little eyes just *shone*, he was so tickled. There's nothing that pleases him like getting praised when he knows it's coming to him.

"You kids go off and p-p-play somethin'," says he. "I want to nose around this p-place to see if I can make anythin' out of that writin' Mr. Wigglesworth left. Seems to me l-like it must have meant this p-place. Don't it to you?"

"Why?" says I.

"Because," says he, "there don't seem to be anythin' about the writin' to indicate any other p-place. This was the p-place he was always at. This was where Rock was, and the w-writin' concerns Rock, you can bet on that. What I got to do is f-find a cat that's always lookin' in one d-direction, and then f-figger on from there."

"Sure," says I, "you just find me a cat that don't never turn her head, and I'll dig up a bag of gold right under her feet. The cats I know

hain't used to actin' jest like that. Sometimes they move; anyways, they wiggle their ears. And the cat 'u'd *starve*," says I. "How could a cat live that didn't move around any?"

"Binney," says he, slow-like, "if you had as m-many brains in your head as you got *words* you'd be a wonder," and off he went, holding all three of his chins up in the air, he was so disgusted.

"He's a funny one, isn't he?" says Rock, looking after him, "but I'll bet he's more fun than any kid I ever saw."

"You bet he is," says I.

"What d'you s'pose he's tryin' to find?" says Rock. "It's sure he doesn't expect to discover a *cat* that always sits still and looks right in one direction. He's got too much sense for that."

"Mostly," says I, "you don't get on to what Mark Tidd is up to until he's done it."

"And then," says Tallow, "sometimes you wisht you hadn't. He'd rather play a joke on somebody than do anything else in the world except think up some business scheme. I'll bet he gets rich some day. Yes, sir, I'll bet he gets richer than his pa."

"Is his father rich?" says Rock.

"Got billions," says Tallow, "and Mark got 'em for him, too. We helped some, but Mark

did most of it. Mark's father is a inventor, and some men stole his turbine, and we fellers got it back again."

"Say," says I, "let's pester him a little to see what he'll do—about that cat, I mean."

"Better not," says Tallow.

"Go on," says Plunk. "Maybe we can get the best of him for once. Tell you what let's do. Let's make up a poem about a cat that don't move, and recite it to him. It 'll tease him to beat the band, because he hates poetry."

"Go ahead," says I. "I hain't no poet. It keeps me busy talkin' ordinary grammar."

"Keeps you more 'n busy," says Plunk. "If I talked as bad grammar as you do I'd git special lessons off'n the teacher."

"Huh!" says I. "I guess I make folks understand what I'm talkin' about, anyhow. Git at that poem."

They sat still, thinking about it, and pretty soon Tallow says, "How'd this do for a first line?

"There was a boy and he was fat.
He went and hunted for a cat."

"Fine," says I. "Go ahead."

After a while Plunk scratched around in his head and dug up another line:

"It was a cat that didn't stir,
And probably it didn't purr."

"Rotten," says I, "but what can you expect of sich a crowd?"

"See what *you* can do, then," says Plunk.

"All right," says I. "Listen to this:

"That was a funny kind of cat;
The boy was talking through his hat."

"Good stuff," says Tallow. "Best yet. Be careful, Binney, or you'll git somethin' printed if you don't watch out."

"Here he comes," says Rock, and, sure enough, there was Mark coming toward us slow, waddling like a duck just before Thanksgiving. He came and sat down without saying a word, and anybody could see he was discouraged. Why, discouragement just oozed out of him. We snickered.

"Say, Mark," says I, "we been improvin' our time while you was gone. We made up a poem. Like to hear it?"

"Go ahead," says he. "I guess I can s-s-stand 'most anythin' to-day."

"Here it is," says I:

"There was a boy and he was fat.
He went and hunted for a cat.

It was a cat that didn't stir,
And probably it didn't purr.
That was a funny kind of cat;
The boy was talking through his hat."

Mark didn't say anything for a couple of minutes, and we knew we had him. At last we had stung him good, and he couldn't think of anything to say. I was that tickled I reached over and poked Tallow in the ribs.

Mark looked at me sad-like, and then says: "I got a l-l-little to add to that poem. How's this?

"He h-hunted for it all alone,
Because the f-f-fellers' heads was bone,
And found a cat made out of *s-stone!*"

He almost yelled that last word, and looked so tickled and excited I knew in a second that he had the best of us again.

"What's that?" says I.

"Come and see," says he, and up we got and followed him. He led us down the yard a piece where we could see all those carved animals, and then he took us around a clump of bushes and pointed down. There was a *cat!* It was a stone cat.

"Guess she don't move frequent, d-does she?" says he.

"For cat's sake!" says Tallow.

Mark grinned. "You said it t-that time. 'The boy was talkin' through his hat,'" he quoted from our poem. "Maybe he was—and maybe not. I was lookin' for somethin' like this. Now, how about cats that don't stir, eh? Guess this cat looks the same way all the time. Don't it?"

"Mark," says I, "how did you ever think of it?"

"It *had* to be this kind of a c-c-cat," says he; "that was p-plain enough."

"Where she looks she walks," says Plunk. "Let's walk."

"Nix," says Mark. "Jethro might be l-l-lookin'. We want to foller out this thing on the quiet—and we'll do it, you bet. We know where to start from, and that's the hardest part of it." He turned to Rock, "I guess we're goin' to haul you out of this scrape," says he, "sooner or later. . . . Now we got to git for h-home. I got work to do."

CHAPTER XIV

"L-LISTEN," says Mark Tidd that night. "We've got to w-w-wake up and do somethin' with this newspaper."

"Huh!" says I. "I thought we *had* been doin' somethin'. Dunno's I ever worked harder in my life."

"Yes," says he, "but what's it g-gettin' us? We're p-payin' our bills and not r-runnin' in debt, but that's about all. No use havin' a b-business if you don't make money out of it."

"Go ahead," says I. "I'm willin' to make all there is."

"I'm goin' ahead," says he. "I'm goin' to start a scheme to get s-subscribers. I want a t-thousand of 'em right off. Not jest f-folks that buys the *Trumpet* on the street, but that p-pays their money and has it all the year. Like to git fifteen hunderd if I could."

"Hain't that many families in Wicksville," says I, "and no family wants more 'n one copy of a paper, even if you do edit it," says I.

"There's other towns," says he. "We got the whole county to p-play with. The Eagle Center *Clarion* come over here and tried to t-t-take our town away from us. Well, turn about's fair play. Besides, there's all the farmers and settlements and what not."

"If you say so," says I, "it must be so." I was a little mite sarcastic, and he came right back at me quick.

"If I say so it's so," says he, "because I don't jest let my t-t-tongue waggle like you. I don't gen'ally say somethin' till I got somethin' to say, after I've f-figgered it out in my head. The t-trouble with you, Binney, is you do most of your t-thinkin' with your stummick."

I didn't think of anything to say back to him.

"And," says he, "you don't do enough thinkin' with t-t-that to give you a stummick-ache."

"If you could think with your stummick," says I, "you'd have some mighty big thoughts," which was so, him having one of the biggest stummicks in town. He just grinned and said that was pretty good for me, and he had hopes I might really say something smart some day if I practised hard.

"Let's see," says he; "there's folks around solicitin' subscriptions for magazines. They must get p-p-paid somehow."

"They do," says I; "my aunt takes subscriptions, and she gits so much for every one she takes. They call it a commission, or somethin' like that."

"Wonder why we couldn't work it ourselves," says he. "Not reg'lar agents," says he, "but some scheme to git a l-l-lot of folks int'rested in gittin' subscribers for us. If we could git a woman's missionary s-s-society to goin' on it, it would s-stir things up a lot. Them wimmin, when they git set on anythin', go after it all-fired hot."

"How about the Ladies' Lit'ry Circle," says I, "and the Home Culture Club?"

"Binney," says he, "that's an idee. L-lemme think. Um! . . . Have to git 'em to w-w-workin' ag'in' each other somehow. Git 'em into a s-squabble of some kind. That 'd do it, sure. How m-many wimmin b'long to those things?"

"There's eighteen in the Circle," says I, "because ma b'longs, and they're meetin' at our house to-morrow. I know there's eighteen, because ma was figgerin' how much she'd have to have to feed 'em. She says two sandriches apiece would do for most clubs, but thirty-six never 'd fill up the wimmin in hern. She says she wished she could find somethin' stylish to put into those sandriches that didn't taste good.

Then, she says, she could brag about havin' somethin' special nice, and at the same time nobody 'd be able to make hogs of theirselves eatin' it."

"Have her t-t-try p-p-perfumed soap," says Mark. "That's swell, but nobody 'd g-gobble it much."

"But," says I, "I dunno how many's in the Home Culture. I kin find out, though."

I did. There was an even twenty in it.

Well, Mark he sat down and pinched his cheek awhile, and then he took to whittling, which showed plain he was going after it hard. He whittled up nigh half a cord of wood before he got it all figgered out to suit him, and then he says, "Binney, who's boss of each of those clubs?"

"Mis' Strubber's president of the Circle," says I, "and Mis' Bobbin's president of the Home Culturers."

"We'll go s-s-see 'em," says he. "We'll give 'em all the lit'ry and all the culture they kin use in a month of Sundays."

So he dragged me off to Mrs. Strubber's house. Mrs. Strubber is one of them big women; not fat, you know, but *big*. I calc'late she's more 'n six feet high, and she could lift a barrel of sugar without turning a hair. But she's smart.

Everybody says so, and she don't deny it herself. Most of the fellows are sort of scairt of her, but Mark didn't seem to be much afraid, for he marched right up to her door and rang the bell.

She came to the door, with her sleeves rolled up, wiping her hands on her apron, and when I see how strong those arms looked I sort of edged back so as to have the steps convenient if she didn't act pleased to see us.

"Well, boys?" says she in a voice perty near as big as she was.

"Mis' S-s-strubber," says Mark, "we've come to ask some advice from you. Everybody says you're the smartest woman in this t-t-town, so we wouldn't go to anybody else with an important t-thing like this."

Well, you should have seen her grin. My! but she was tickled. "Come right in," says she. "I was jest in the middle of a batch of fried-cakes, but I calc'late Milly kin finish 'em up. Like fresh fried-cakes?" says she.

"Not g-gen'ally," says Mark, "but I've heard a lot about yourn. Folks says they melt in your mouth."

"A-hum!" says Mrs. Strubber, perducing some of them fried-cakes. "You're a onusual p'lite young man, Mark Tidd. I wisht other boys would pattern after you."

"Yas'm," says Mark, his mouth full of fried-cake.

"What kin I do for you?" says she. "Don't hurry. Eat them cakes and don't try to talk till you're done. You might strangle," says she.

"Mis' Strubber," says Mark, "I've heard some argimint in Wicksville over these t-t-two wimmin's clubs—the Circle," he says, "and the Home Culturers."

"A-hum!" says Mrs. Strubber, drawing herself up like a rooster looking for trouble—not a banty rooster. No, sir, one of them great big Barred Rocks.

"Yes," he says, "there's some t-talk, and I figger it ought to be s-settled once for all. 'Course most folks agrees that *you're* the smartest woman the' is, but a few hain't got sense enough to own up to it. But quite a few f-folks is divided over which of the two clubs is the brainiest, and which does the m-most good here, and all that. Now, for me, there hain't any doubt at all. But it ought to be s-s-settled, and I f-figger the Wicksville *Trumpet* ought to t-take a hand, it bein' literature, kind of."

"A-hum!" says she, scowling as black as a pail of axle grease.

"So," says he, "I got to t-thinkin' it over," he says, "and it l-l-looked like the public de-

manded that question should get settled once for all. Now, if *you* kin see your way clear to come in with me, the *Trumpet* 'll announce a contest between the clubs, and the thing 'll be decided forever. Not only," says he, "as to b-brains, but as to c-cookin'."

"If them Home Culturers," says Mrs. Strubber, "got the *nerve*," she says, "to come into a contest ag'in' us, I guess we got the self-respect to give 'em the come-down that's due 'em."

"Good," says Mark. "I f-figgered you'd think that way."

"What kind of a contest?" says she.

"Sev'ral kinds," says he, "endin' with a big display of all kinds of cookin', and two nights with big dinners, one to be served by each club. There'll be the argimint contest, and it's always p-practical results that shows there, hain't it, Mis' Strubber?"

"You bet it is," says she.

"So," says he, "I kind of reasoned out that we'd let results tell. Now," he says, "the kind of argimints that counts is *sellin'* argimints. And you got to sell somethin' hard to sell, and everybody's got to sell the same thing."

"Mark Tidd," says she, "that's a splendid idee."

"I was wonderin' what you could t-tackle," says he. "It ought to be somethin' havin' to do with b-brains."

"Sure thing," says she.

"Books, maybe," says he. "Or maybe s-somethin' that would be harder 'n books."

"My husband's sister's second daughter," says she, "sells magazine subscriptions. She says it's the hardest thing there is—except newspaper subscriptions. She tackled that, but she says it was too much for her."

"Um!" says Mark. "I bet it wouldn't be too hard for *you*."

"A-hum!" says Mrs. Strubber. "I calc'late I could do it on a pinch."

"Then," says Mark, "let's settle on that—sellin' n-n-newspaper subscriptions. But what p-paper can you git to let you? It 'll be p-perty hard, won't it?"

She thought quite a spell, and guessed it would be. Then all of a sudden she bust right out and clapped her hands together, "Why," she says, "you're int'rested in this, and you got a paper. Couldn't we git you to let us use the *Trumpet?*"

Mark he sat back and frowned and sort of shook his head, but after a minute he says, deliberate-like, "Well," says he, "I guess I'd

be willin' to do that for a cause of this kind. But," says he, "it's concedin' consid'able."

"Oh," says she, "thank you, Mark! It's awful good of you to let us do that. But what's the rest of your scheme?"

"Why," says he, "every year's subscription you sell will mean ten votes, and the side sellin' the most will be showed to be the smartest arguers, and the smartest arguers, everybody admits, is the smartest f-folks all around. Then, at the end, there'll be a dinner served by the Circle, and one served by the Home Culturers, that nobody can go to but subscribers to the *Trumpet*. That 'll help sell the s-s-subscriptions. The night after the second dinner 'll be the cookin' show, admission included when you sell a s-subscription, and every subscriber 'll have one vote as to which club's wimmin is the b-best cooks. That 'll about shut up every argimint as to which is the s-smartest and usefulest. 'Cause," says he, "the ones that win both them things will p-prove it so nobody kin say a word."

"Mark Tidd," says she, "you're a smart boy."

"Like the idee?" says he, looking tickled to death.

"You bet," says she. "How 'll we start it?"

"Why," says he, "you have a m-meetin' of your club and git up a challenge to them Home Culturers, darin' 'em to contest that way ag'in' you. I'll p-publish it in the *Trumpet*, and it bein' public that way, they won't dast to refuse, and you'll have 'em. See? And," says he, "as a example of p-public spirit," he says, "the *Trumpet* will give a p-prize to the winners equal to t-t-ten per cent.," he says, "of all the subscriptions taken. It 'll be," says he, "a set of books, real brainy books, for the winnin' club always to have in its l-l-library."

"Mark," says she, "you're that generous!"

"Generous!" I thought to myself, for I knew mighty well Mark would be tickled to pay near twice that much to git subscriptions.

"I'll call that meetin' for to-morrow," says she, "and have the challenge ready so's you can publish it in the next paper."

"Got a picture of you?" says he. "I'd like to p-print it the day the challenge comes out."

Well, the way she jerked one out of the plush album and gave it to him would have made you scairt. She jest *tore* it out of the page without waiting to draw it out of the slits.

"Mark Tidd," says she, "the club 'll give you a special vote of thanks for this," she says.

Mark he said something sugary to her and

then we left, and he kept his face straight till we got around the corner. Then he just leaned up against a tree and shook like a plate of jelly. I don't know as I ever saw him laugh harder, and I laughed, too, though it wasn't so funny to me, for I was thinking what a slick way he had about him. My goodness! I'd hate to have Mark Tidd want me to do something I didn't want to, because, before I knew it, he'd have me all through with it.

We went back to the office, where Plunk and Tallow were keeping shop, and who should be there but the Man With the Black Gloves. Yes, sir, he just went in ahead of us, and he was writing another advertisement to be put in the paper. It went like this:

Jethro: Same time. Same place. Important. G. G. G.

"Well," says Mark, when he had gone out, "I guess we got to m-make another t-trip to that bridge."

CHAPTER XV

NEXT afternoon late Mrs. Strubber came in with a challenge to the Home Culturers, all drawn up and ready to print. Mark had sent her picture away to have a cut made, and as soon as the challenge came in we took it right out to Tecumseh Androcles Spat to have him set it in type. He read it over once, and then he read it over twice, and then he reached for his coat.

"Where you g-g-goin'?" asks Mark.

"Far, far away," says he, moving toward the door.

"What d'you m-mean?" says Mark.

"I've lost my taste for this employment," says he. "The sweetness of the job got worn off as soon as I read that paper. I'm a peaceful man, Mark Tidd. I hain't never carried no weapons, and I regard those that seek for warfare and strife as not havin' the necessary quantity of brains. I'll admit," says he, "that I've participated in a couple of riots and a few fights, but it

wasn't of my own free will and accord. Furthermore, and you can take the word of Tecumseh Androcles Spat for it, the newspaper business hain't as safe as knittin' socks, anyhow, but when you start to call down trouble onto yourself, like this challenge will call it down, then it's time for a man who's set up as many almanacs as I have, and is steeped in wisdom, to go and enlist in a regiment bound to fight Injuns."

"Mr. Spat," says Mark, "what in the world are you talkin' about?"

"You'll see," says he. "Wait till them enraged wimmin start besiegin' this office. Wait till they jam into the place bristlin' with hatpins and dignity. Wait till the full awfulness of what's goin' to happen begins to occur, and then you'll think of Tecumseh Androcles Spat and regret you cast aside his wise words with scorn."

"Shucks!" says Mark. "Those ladies will get us a wad of s-s-subscriptions."

"At what a cost!" says he.

"Tecumseh Androcles Spat," says Mark, "be you goin' to f-f-fail us when we need you most, eh? Be you g-goin' to desert us, carryin' away the wisdom and experience we can't spare? Lemme ask you, how d-d-do you s'pose we can git along without you to advise us? If t-t-trouble

should come," says he, "who would git us out of it if you was g-g-gone?"

"Hum!" says Spat.

Mark winked at me.

"See what you've made of this p-p-paper already," says he. "L-look what you kin do before you're through. D'you know how f-folks in this town speak about you, Mr. Spat? D'you know you've been spoke of for the State Legislature? And you'd go away and desert Wicksville and us on account of a few wimmin that couldn't hurt a-a-anythin'."

"Mark Tidd," says Spat, "it seems like I'm duty bound to stay, but mark my words, which is words of experience, paid for with groans and misery, you're goin' to wish you was locked into a cage with ravenin' wildcats and howlin' hyenas before this contest is over. I'll stay, but I'll suffer. I'll stay to save you boys from the results of your rashness. . . . Now gimme back that challenge."

He went back to work and set it up, and more stuff Mark had written explaining all about the contest, and Mrs. Strubber's picture was to be printed right in the middle of all of it, with some glowing and complimentary facts about her and her club. The whole thing was to be printed on the first page of the *Trumpet*.

While this was going on Mark and the rest of us was pretty busy getting all the news of the county fair that was going on, and the night before the *Trumpet* came out we had a heap of writing to do. It was my job to write little items about folks and things that happened. Mark said he wanted enough to fill a column, so I set to work, and it *was* work, I can tell you. I did more chawing of my pencil than writing, and it took me about a dozen times as long to do it as it took Mark to write three times as much. But I was pretty proud of what I'd done when I was through with it. I figgered it would be about the most interesting part of the paper, and it did come pretty close to being that. When I handed it to Mark I says, "There, if that hain't perty good newspaper writin' I hope I don't ever git to eat another fried-cake."

Mark read it over, and every once in a while he would look up at me and chuckle, and then he says, "Binney, if you'd done this apurpose it would be g-great."

"I done it apurpose," says I. "Think I done all that writin' by accident, like a feller would stub his toe and accidentally skin his nose?"

"Um!" says he. "We'll p-p-print it jest as it stands, and say, 'By Binney Jenks,' at the top, so everybody 'll know you d-did it. That," says

he, "may save the l-lives of some of the rest of us."

"What you mean?" says I.

"I'll r-read 'em to you," says he. This was the first he read:

"'Mr. Bud Drimple took first prize for the fattest pig at the fair.'" Mark peeked at me out of his little eyes that was twinkling like everything. "Maybe Bud Drimple *was* the f-f-fattest pig there and ought to have got the p-prize," says he, "but he'll hate to be t-told so."

I didn't say a word. Mark read another.

"'Many folks asked Jacob Wester what he exhibited at the fair. He said it was a cow.'" Mark giggled. "What did it look like, Binney, if so many f-f-folks was uncertain about it? Did it resemble a l-locomotive or a sewin'-m-machine?"

"Huh!" says I. "You think you're smart."

"No," says he, "I t-think you be. Here's another: 'Mrs. Hob Sweet was among those watching the prize Jersey cow. Many claimed she was the finest piece of live stock on the grounds.' . . . Which, Binney, the Jersey or Mis' Sweet?"

"Anybody," says I, "would know I meant the Jersey."

"'Jed Tingle,'" he read again, "'who just got m-m-married to Myrtie Wise, bought him a new horse-whip, for which he s-s-says he's got pressing need lately.'" Mark shook his head. "I dunno," says he, "but we might get sued in court for accusin' a man of thrashin' his wife."

"I didn't," says I. "That wasn't why he had pressin' need of that whip; it's because, as everybody knows, he's been stuck with a balky colt."

"All right," says Mark. "How about this? 'Dave Ward made two purchases at the fair. One was a pie baked by Mrs. John Baird, and sold at the Methodist ladies' booth. The other was a bottle of pain-killer.'"

"What's wrong with that?" I says.

"N-nothin'," says he. "It's good sense. You'd know if you ever ate a pie of hern. Dave was wise, but maybe Mis' Baird won't like bein' twitted with it."

"Git out!" says I, beginning to feel uncomfortable. "You twist around everything a feller says."

"This," says he, "is m-mighty descriptive. 'Crowds stood around the merry-go-round watching it go around and around.'"

I didn't say a word. He was makin' me mad.

There were a lot more of them, but I told Mark he needn't bother to read me any others. I had enough. The way *he* read them made them sound altogether different than I had meant them, but I guess he read what I wrote, all right. Which goes to show that folks ought to be careful what they write, and be sure they mean what they are saying. I'll bet lots of trouble gits started just that way. One fellow writes something that's all right, but says it careless, and the fellow that reads it thinks something mean is said about him. Then, *bingo!*

Anyhow, Mark put them in the paper just as they were, and the paper came out. You can believe me or not, just as you want to, but the next two or three days I was pretty scarce around there, especially after Hob Sweet dropped into the office with a horse-whip and inquired after me anxious, like he was particular desirous of seeing me. I saw him coming and made up my mind that some place else would be more comfortable, so I skinned out of the back door.

While I was making for a safe spot I almost bumped into Jed Tingle and Mrs. Baird, who were standing on a corner, each one with a *Trumpet* clutched in their hand, and talking mad as anything. I didn't stop to mention anything

to them, but cut out around them so as not to disturb them a mite.

Mark knew where I'd be and he sent Plunk out with a basket of grub and a warning to keep away from home till it was bedtime, and then to sneak in pretty average cautious, because, he said, there had been a procession of folks calling at my house all day to look for me, and he judged my father was some put out at being bothered that much.

Well, that blew over after a while. Folks sort of forgot it in the excitement of the battle between the Literary Circle and the Home Culturers. No sooner had that challenge got around than Mrs. Bobbin rushed into the office with an answer to it and *her* picture. And her answer wasn't what you'd call diplomatic. Well, Mrs. Strubber's challenge wasn't as gentle as it might have been.

Mrs. Bobbin's paper says:

The members of the Home Culture Club has read the challenge put out by Mrs. Strubber and them other wimmin that calls themselves the Literary Circle, and the idea of their being smarter than the Home Culturers made us all laugh till we was sick.

We're tickled to death to contest with them in any kind of a contest from washing dishes to building a house. If they can do a single thing that we can't do a heap better, why, now's the time to show us. We're going

into this thing, and when we're through somebody in this town is going to be made to look mighty foolish—which is their natural way of looking.

There was more of it, but that's enough to show how friendly it was and what a pleasant and sociable little contest it was going to be.

But what Mrs. Bobbin said was singing a baby to sleep when you come to compare it with what was said later and what was done later. The town took sides, and there was more bitter feelings than there was before the election when we voted on local option. Yes, sir, and more fight, too, because every husband of a club-woman figured he had to let on he was certain his wife was smartest and the best cook and the whole bag of tricks, and some of them men didn't have any arguments to offer except what they could double up in their fists. Why, you could go down back of the fire-hall and see a fight almost any time of day!

The contest was to run two weeks, ending up with those two dinners and the exhibit of cooking, but before twenty-four hours was gone by it looked like maybe there wouldn't be enough folks left undamaged to be in at the finish.

Folks didn't dare stick their heads out of doors for fear of bumping into a woman after their subscription to the *Trumpet*. They just dug in

like it was a matter of life and death. Mark watched it and grinned, for, says he, if there's a man, woman, child, cat, dog, or parrot in Wicksville that hain't a subscriber for our paper before this thing is over, it's because he's up so high in a balloon that nobody can reach him.

As for Tecumseh Androcles Spat, he worked with a baseball bat right beside him, and the way to both doors barricaded with packing-boxes so nobody could get to him. And when he went out he pulled up the collar of his coat and he jerked his hat down over his eyes so nobody would recognize him. He said, as far as he was concerned, he'd a heap rather have a whole skin and no excitement than to be having all the fun in the world, but obliged to see it out of a bed in the hospital.

Some of us had to be in the office all the time these days, and we drew sticks to see who it would be every morning. I lost three days hand running, so I didn't get out to see Rock, nor out to the bridge when Jethro and G. G. G. met there the night that was set. No, I just hung around the office and took in subscriptions that the women brought in, and gave them out receipts, and talked to them, and kept both sides happy, like Mark told me to do. He said I was to do what I could to make both parties sure

they was winning, but not to give out any real facts about how many subscribers was got. Which I did as good as I could.

Mark and Tallow went to the bridge, and it seemed from what G. G. G. told Jethro that the man called Pekoe, who had brought Rock to Wicksville, was doing something that hadn't been expected of him, and that G. G. G. was startled over it and wanted Jethro to take extra pains to see that Pekoe didn't get to see Rock. From what Mark and Tallow could gather, this Pekoe was coming to see Rock, but they didn't know why—G. G. G. and Jethro didn't.

"What he's up to I don't know," G. G. G. told Jethro. "He don't *know* anything. He can't *tell* the boy anything. But something's in the air. You keep them apart."

"You bet I will," says Jethro.

When Mark and Tallow came back Mark says, "F-fellers, keep your eyes p-peeled for a strange man. We want to know it the m-minute this Pekoe strikes Wicksville."

So, not having anything else to do but run a paper, and dodge folks that wanted to lick me, and help with the contest, and do the chores at home, and play some, and a few other little things, I had to help keep my eye open to find a man I'd never saw and didn't have any idea

what he looked like. Mark was always reasonable about what he wanted you to do. He never asked anybody to do more than *twict* as much as it was humanly possible for anybody to manage.

CHAPTER XVI

I'LL bet you've forgotten all about Spragg, the Eagle Center *Clarion* man. If you have, you want to remember him again, for the time was coming fast when he would be right on hand like a case of mumps. Not that mumps are generally on hand. When I had them they reached from one ear right around to the other, and Mark Tidd didn't have half so much face as I did.

Well, one day about the time the contest was getting nicely started up I saw Spragg in town. He'd waited till things cooled down, and was there at the hotel, nosing around just as if nothing had happened.

"Howdy-do, Mr. Spragg!" says I, with my face as sober as a judge. "Hope you're feelin' well and gittin' all the exercise you need."

"I'm feelin' well," says he, "but I'm short of exercise. I'll git it, though, and don't you lose sight of that. You kids think you're pretty smart, but my name's spelled S-p-r-a-g-g, see?"

"No," says I, not seeing at all. What did *that* have to do with it, I wondered; but, just for luck, I thought I'd josh him a little. "I thought your name was spelled M-u-d. Looked like that awhile back."

"Go on," says he. "Keep heapin' it up. Perty soon I'll have enough ag'in' you boys to make it worth my while to git even. And when I set out to git even I do it with a plane," says he.

"Reg'lar carpenter, hain't you? I didn't know but a man with a name spelled like yours would even things off with a butter-knife, or maybe a nursin'-bottle."

"You better move away from here," says he, "before I lose my temper."

"Huh!" says I, moving off where I'd have a good start if he came after me. "Folks that loses their temper in Wicksville gen'ally gits all the help they want findin' it ag'in."

"Go ahead," says he; "get all the laugh you can out of it now. In another day or two you'll be laughin' crossways of your mouth. What would you smart newspaper kids say to a daily in Wicksville, eh? Reg'lar city daily. Guess that would sort of put the lid on that old weekly of yours, wouldn't it? Spragg is my name. Begins with a capital S, remember that."

I wasn't going to let on to him that what he said worried me, so I said to him: "You'd have to be spryer 'n you be now to git out a daily. The way you move around I guess a monthly's about *your* speed."

He made a move after me and I scooted down the street to tell Mark. He wasn't in, though, and Tallow said he and Plunk had gone out to see Rock at the farm.

"When he comes back," says I, "he'll have all the rock he wants, and it looks to me like it would be rock bottom. We're goin' to be up against a daily paper here."

An hour after in comes Mark and Plunk.

"B-been studyin' the yard there at Rock's," says he, "and I c-c-can't make head nor tail to that message of Mr. Wigglesworth's. Found the cat, all right, and w-w-walked where she l-looked. M-measured off a hunderd and six feet, but there we come to n-ninety degrees in the shade. Stumped us. Found the shade, all right, but it wasn't ninety degrees. Held a t-thermometer, and it wasn't but sixty-seven."

"It's goin' to be ninety degrees in the shade of this office," says I. "Spragg's back and is goin' to start a daily to run us out of business."

"How d'you know?" says he.

"Spragg says so," I told him.

"Hum!" says he. "I sort of d-doubt it. Spragg don't look like he had money enough or gumption enough."

"Maybe somebody's backin' him," says I.

"Might be," says he. "Guess I b-b-better look into it."

So he and I went out together, leaving Plunk and Tallow to mind the office.

"A d-daily," says he, "would have hard sleddin' here. Don't b'lieve it would make a go. But while Spragg was t-tryin' it he might hurt us a lot. Two newspapers in a little town l-like this can't m-make money."

"Neither can one," says I. "Anyhow we hain't got rich. Might as well be two as one, so far's I can see."

"The *Trumpet's* goin' to pay," says he, and he shut his jaw tight, like he does when he's made up his mind to do something or bust. "Spragg or no Spragg, we're goin' to make a reg'lar paper of the *Trumpet*—and git money out of it. Don't go gittin' limp in the s-s-spine," he says.

It don't take long in Wicksville to find out what's going on, because there isn't much going on, anyhow, and as soon as something turns up and one man hears of it, why, he can't rest or eat till he's run all over peddling it to everybody

he sees. And every man *he* tells has to start out the same way, so in a half-hour from the time a thing starts almost everybody in town is out looking for somebody to tell it to. That's what makes it so hard to run a newspaper. Everybody knows everything he reads in the paper as soon as the editor does. I guess about the only reason folks subscribe to the *Trumpet* at all is to see if their own name is mentioned, or to say to somebody else: "Huh! There hain't never no news in this paper. I knew every doggone thing printed in it two days before the paper come out."

Well, that's why it wasn't hard for us to find out that Spragg really was planning to start a daily paper in town, nor to figger out that he didn't have much money to start it with himself. He was trying to start what he called a co-operative paper. Co-operative means that one man gets a lot of other men to put their money into a thing with the idea that they'll all get some good out of it, whereas nobody gets anything but the fellow that starts it.

Spragg's notion was to put in a little money himself and to have the merchants and business folks in town put in the rest. His argument was that there was money in running a newspaper, and the money was made out of the advertising.

So, if the men that put in the advertisements and paid money for them owned the newspaper themselves, why, they would just be paying the money to themselves, and the subscribers would pay the cost of getting out the paper. So the advertisers would be getting their advertisements practically for nothing. It sounded dangerous to me.

I guess it worried Mark some, too, for if merchants could get their advertising in a daily practically without costing them a cent, what would they spend any money in the *Trumpet* for?

Spragg was just talking the thing up, but he was talking a lot, and it looked like he had the business men interested. Where Spragg came in was that he was to be the editor and have a salary and a share of the profits.

Mark went and sat down on my steps and began to whittle like he always does when he's got a puzzle on his mind. He whittled and whittled and didn't say a word for an hour. Then he looked at me out of his twinkling little eyes that you could hardly see over his fat cheeks and says:

"I guess Spragg's idee is to get these f-f-fellers all into the paper. They'll p-put their money in to start it, and p-perty soon they'll see that their

advertisements hain't free. Not by a big s-sight. And p-perty soon they'll get disgusted and along Spragg 'll come and buy their shares of the paper dirt cheap. He f-f-figgers to come out at the other end with a daily p-paper that didn't cost him hardly anything. And then he'll be where he can m-make some money."

"Yes," says I, "because by that time, with all the stores not givin' us any advertisements, we'll be busted."

"That," says he, "is how Spragg f-f-figgers it. But," says he, "I figger it some d-different."

"How do you figger it?" says I.

"I f-f-figger," says he, stuttering like a gas engine just starting up on a cold morning, "that he hain't ever g-goin' to start any paper at all, and that we're goin' to keep all the business we've got, and that Mr. Spragg 'll wisht he never heard of Wicksville or of the *Trumpet* or of us."

"Sounds good," says I, "and I've seen you pull out of a lot of deep holes, but this one looks to me like it would be too much for you. I guess this time, Mark, you're up against it hard."

"Binney," says he, "if Spragg b-beats us then you can p-paint a sign sayin' 'idiot' and pin it on my b-back, and I'll wear it a month."

You notice he said "us." That was just like him always. He wasn't what you'd call modest, but he was square with us other fellows that didn't think as quick and as shrewd as he did. We all got the credit for what was done if he could fix it that way. But I don't believe many folks were fooled by it. They knew Mark Tidd and they knew us.

"You can always catch f-f-folks with a scheme," says he, "that makes 'em think they're gettin' somethin' for n-nothin'. But," he says, "I hain't ever seen anybody git somethin' without payin' about what it was worth."

"Yes," says I, "if you coop a watermelon out of Deacon Burgess's garden, why, you pay for it by tearin' your pants on his barb-wire fence, or by gittin' the stummick ache."

"That's about the idee," says he.

"What you goin' to do first?" I says.

"Haven't f-figgered it out yet," says he. Then he went to talking about the contest.

"How many subscriptions have we got in?" says he.

"Lemme see," says I, "this is the third day it's been goin' and yesterday we had seventy. Tallow said we got in twenty-six this morning. That makes ninety-six."

"Huh!" says he. "They hain't got warmed up

yet. But we'll get 'em good perty soon. They'll start comin' strong."

We walked down the street and in front of the post-office was a crowd standing around a couple of men that was arguing so you could have heard them in the next township. Mark and I ran over to see what was going on, because newspaper men always ought to be right where things are happening. We edged into the crowd and found out it was Mr. Strubber and Mr. Bobbin, and they was quarreling about how smart their wives was.

"Huh!" says Strubber. "Your wife wouldn't never have dared to git into a contest with my wife if she hadn't been forced. She was cornered and dassen't back down."

"Strubber," says Bobbin, "I hain't denyin' your wife has her p'ints. There's ways where she can beat my wife all holler. Why, when it comes to takin' the broom and chasin' her husband around the house Mrs. Bobbin wouldn't even tackle the job at all. She knows without tryin' that Mrs. Strubber kin beat her good and plenty there."

"You mean," hollered Strubber, "that my wife chases me with a broom? You dast say that? Why, you miserable little swiggle-legged, goggle-eyed, slumgullion, Mrs. Strubber's as

gentle as a lamb! Yes, sir, she's all brain, that's what she is. If you was to take Mrs. Strubber's brain out and lay it on top of that thing *your* wife calls a brain, it 'u'd be like coverin' a pea with a bushel basket."

"Sure!" says Bobbin. "It's big all right, but you're right when you compare it to a bushel basket. It's as thin and empty as any bushel basket in Michigan."

Strubber pretended to look at Bobbin careful, and then he laughed out loud. "Folks tells me," says he, "that you really eat the stuff Mrs. Bobbin cooks."

"You bet I do," says Bobbin.

"Lookin' at you," says Strubber, "I'm prepared to admit it. Nothin' else would make you look that way. I always wondered what made you sich a peeked, ornery, yaller-complected, funny-lookin' little runt like you be. You must 'a' had a tough constitution when you got married, or you wouldn't never have survived all these years—if what you *be* can be called survivin'. As for me, I guess I'd rather not 'a' survived at all as to be what that cookin' has made of you."

"Huh!" says Bobbin. "I hain't no tub of lard like *you* be. What I git is good wholesome food that makes muscles and brain. You get

fed on sloppy stuff to fatten you. You know what we feed hogs, don't you, eh? Gather it up out of pails at folks' back doors. It fats up the hogs, too. Well, Mrs. Strubber, she uses that same method on you."

"Be you comparin' my wife's cookin' to *swill?*" yelled Strubber, wabbling all over like a bowl of jelly he was that mad.

"Not comparin'," says Bobbin. "And what goes for Mrs. Strubber goes for all the rest of them Lit'ry Circle wimmin."

"Eh? What's that?" bellowed another man from the crowd. "I want you should know *my* wife b'longs to that Lit'ry Circle, and the finest wimmin in town does. Wimmin b'longs to that that would be ashamed to be one of them Home Culturers. Why, nobody b'longs to the Home Culturers but folks the Lit'ry Circle wimmin wouldn't have nothin' to do with."

"Is that *so?*" another fellow shouted, and began working close to the row. "My wife's a Home Culturer, and if you think I'll stand by to let a spindle-shanked, knock-kneed, bald-headed, squint-eyed wampus like you say sich things, why, you're mighty badly mistook. Listen here. 'Tain't doin' no good to stand here fightin' about our wives. There's a contest on

to see which ones is the best. I don't need no contest to tell *me*. But us men better shut up and let the contest go ahead. Then you Lit'ry Circle fellers will have to hunt your holes. Why, doggone you, them Home Culturers will git two subscriptions to your one. Hear *me*. And when it comes to cookin' and gittin' up a meal of vittles—well, jest wait, that's all I got to say."

He turned around and began to push out of the crowd, and so did the other men. I guess they judged they was gettin' perty close to a fight, and that jest talking wouldn't answer the purpose much longer. I notice that men is willing to stand and rave and tear and talk jest so long as it hain't likely to go any farther. But the minute things begins to look like business, and spectators is all keyed up to see a fight, why, the talking stops and the folks that started it all begins to disappear fast. Mostly a man that talks won't fight, and a man that fights keeps his mouth tight shut.

Mark and I went along toward the office.

"L-l-looks to me," says he, grinning like all git out, "as if f-folks was beginnin' to git a bit het up over the contest."

"Yes," says I. "I hope both sides don't turn to and get het up at us. If they do," says

I, "the South Pole is about the only place we'll be safe, and maybe not there."

"I don't care," says he, "as long as it gits us s-s-subscriptions."

Which was just exactly like him. Results was what counted.

CHAPTER XVII

NEXT morning Mark and Plunk and I went out to the Wigglesworth farm to see Rock. We walked right into the yard like we always do, now that Jethro thinks we're working for him, but Rock wasn't in sight. Jethro was, though. He was fussing around the side yard and we walked over to where he was.

"Howdy, Jethro!" says Mark, and Jethro turned his face toward us. He had one of the biggest and best black eyes I ever saw. It was a regular socdolager of a black eye—one of the kind that runs way down on your cheek and that starts to wiggling and twitching every once in a while like a blob of jelly.

"Howdy!" says Jethro, short-like.

"Run into somethin'?" says I.

"Yes," says he, and felt of his eye.

"I run into one of them things once," says Plunk, who talks sometimes when he ought to keep his mouth shut. "There was a boy on the other end of it, and he was mad at me."

"There wasn't no boy on the other end of this," says Jethro.

"Where's Rock?" says Mark.

"Around the house somewheres," says Jethro. "Yell and he'll come."

So we left Jethro and went around back of the house and yelled for Rock. In a minute he came, and you could see right off that he was either sick or something. He wasn't exactly pale, but he looked like he'd like to be pale. His eyes was kind of big and hollow like he hadn't slept much.

"Never was so glad to see anybody in my life," says he, and he said it like he meant it.

"How d-d-did Jethro git his b-black eye?" says Mark.

"I don't know," says Rock, and he shivered a little. "Something has been happening. I don't know what. I'm scared, and I'm not ashamed to own it up. Last night, just after I went to bed, somebody came to the door. After that I heard voices down-stairs, and then a whopping racket like somebody was smashing the furniture. Then there was a noise like a man was dragging a bag of flour up-stairs—way up into the third story. I didn't dare sneak out to see what it was, but I couldn't get to sleep. In about an hour I heard something moving

around over my head somewhere. And then somebody began to thump on a door and yell, 'Hey, there. Lemme out of here. Lemme out of here.' "

"Yes," says Mark, eager-like.

"Then Jethro went banging up-stairs and there was a lot of yelling and banging, and then Jethro came down again. Since then I've heard somebody moving around up there. Every once in a while, whoever it is, takes a crack at the door and yells a little."

"Um!" says Mark. "T-that's what Jethro run into, Plunk. It was a f-feller's fist, which is what causes most black eyes. I've heard of folks gittin' 'em by f-fallin' out of bed, and by runnin' into a d-d-door in the dark, and by havin' a bird fly into their face, and by stoopin' over quick and buttin' their own knee. I've heard of all those ways, but when you come to git the f-f-facts, most gen'ally you find out it was a fist they run into. I f-figgered it was that way with Jethro, and I guess I kin n-name the fist."

"Go on," says Plunk.

"It b'longed to a f-feller named Pekoe," says Mark.

"*Pekoe!*" says Rock.

"That's the f-feller."

"He's the man that brought me here," says Rock.

"Jest so," says Mark.

"What is he back for? And why did Jethro shut him up?" says Rock.

"That," says Mark, "is what it's our b-b-business to find out."

"Easy," says I. "Jest go up to his door and ask."

"Sure," says Plunk. "Jethro's out in the yard."

"M-maybe," says Mark, with a sort of grin, "we might try."

We went to the back door and started in, but just as we opened the door Jethro came into the kitchen and looked at us, standing between us and the door toward the front of the house.

"Better play outdoors to-day," says he. "I'm goin' to clean house, and I don't want you kids underfoot."

So out we went.

"Hum!" says Mark. "Jethro's out in the yard. Easy to g-g-git to see this Pekoe. Easy l-like turnin' three summersets in the air without a spring-board."

"I guess he don't want us messin' around," says I.

"Didn't judge he would," says Mark, "so it must be there's s-somethin' to find out. As soon

as you see a f-f-feller tryin' to keep somethin' away from you, why, you want to git to work to find out what it is. 'Cause, m-m-most gen'ally it's somethin' you'll be glad to know."

"What room was he shut up in?" says I.

"Somewhere on the third floor," says Rock. "It sounded almost over my head."

"Where's your room?" says Mark.

"Other side of the house," says Rock. "I'll show you."

"Not too s-s-sudden," says Mark. "We don't want to let on to Jethro we're up to anythin', or suspect anythin'. Let's go to the other side of the house and p-play around awhile first."

So we did. We played tag, which wasn't much of a game for Mark Tidd, though he moved a lot faster than you'd have thought. But when he ran he looked like it was going to bust him all to pieces, and the sight of it generally made you laugh so you couldn't run yourself. That kind of evened things up.

After a while Mark says, "N-now, Rock, you run like the d-dickens, around the other side of the house, with Binney chasin' you. Go over by that l-little grape-arbor where we used to m-meet you, and then l-lay down like you was tired out. We'll come along behind."

Rock and I tore off, with Plunk and Mark coming along behind, and all lay down like we were tired right in front of the arbor.

"Don't l-look at the house," says Mark. "Probably Jethro's watchin'."

"There's your cat," I says to Mark, pointing over where his stone cat was.

"Huh!" says he. "N-n-ninety degrees in the shade. There's where you quit walkin' where she l-looks," says he. "Right under that tree there."

The tree was back toward the rear of the house, but out quite a ways from it. We all looked at it.

"I can't make out," says Mark, "what the weather has to do with it. Hot or cold, it gits me."

"Ninety degrees in the shade is pretty hot," says Plunk.

"Maybe," says I, "it hain't got anything to do with how hot it is. Maybe he wrote it that way just to fool folks and make it harder to know what he was tryin' to tell."

Mark he looked at me a minute like he was mad. Then he reached over and banged me on the back, and says: "Binney, I sh'u'dn't be s'prised if you amounted to s-somethin' some day. Weather was what Mr. Wigglesworth

wanted f-folks to think of that happened to see the writin'. So," says he, "it wasn't weather he meant at all. I was a noodle not to think of that. Um! . . . Ninety degrees. What's ninetv degrees except weather?"

I didn't think of anything, and nobody else did, either. We thought quite a while, and then Mark slapped his fat leg and started to shake all over with one of them still laughs of his. "Why, you boobs," says he, "ninety degrees is m-measurin'! That's it. You know a circle? Well, there's three hunderd and sixty degrees around one. In 'rithmetic or somethin' they divide up a circle l-like a clock, only, instead of havin' minutes marked off, they have degrees. Ninety degrees. . . . Um! . . . That's a quarter of the way around a circle. If you walk to the middle of a circle, and then turn off to the place on the circle that's ninety degrees from the place where you first stepped on the circle, why, it's a right angle. See?"

"No," says I, "my eddication hain't got that far."

He drew it out on the ground, and then it was as plain as plain could be.

"You walk where the c-c-cat looks," says he, excited and stuttering like the mischief. "When

you've walked as far as the writin' says—a hunderd and t-ten feet, wasn't it?—you turn off at a right angle, and there you are."

"Which way d'you turn?" says I.

That stopped him a minute, but he recited over Mr. Wigglesworth's writing: "'Where p-pussy looks she walks. Thirty and twenty and ten and forty-six. N-ninety degrees in the shade. In. Down. What color is a b-brick? Investigate. B'lieve what t-tells the truth.'"

"Yes," says I.

"What comes after ninety degrees in the shade?" says he.

"'In,'" says I.

"In what?" says he.

"I dunno," says I.

"Well," says he, "use your b-brains. If you turn to the left what is there to go in?"

"Nothin'," says I, looking over that way.

"If you turn to the right, what is there to g-g-go in?"

"Why," says I, "the house is that way."

"Well," says he, "then I guess you t-turn to the right, don't you? If directions tell you to go in, and there hain't anythin' to *go* into, why, then, you're turnin' wrong. Whatever it is we're l-lookin' for is in the house."

"Looks that way," says I.

"What doors are on the back of the house?" says Mark to Rock.

"Kitchen door, and a door that goes down cellar," says Rock.

"The cellar d-d-door 's the one," says Mark, "because the next word in the writin' is 'Down.' You got to go in and down, which m-m-means you go in the cellar door and down cellar. We're gettin' it, Rock. I knew we would if we stuck to it long enough. Now we've got to get into that cellar. Can't f-f-figger out the rest of that writin' till we do."

"If you say so," says I, "I guess it must be so." Maybe I was a little sarcastic, but he didn't pay any attention to me; he was too interested. That's the way with him. When he gets his mind settled down to thinking about a thing, you could shoot him out of a cannon and he wouldn't pay any attention to it. Concentrate is what Tecumseh Androcles Spat calls it. He says Mark is one of the greatest concentrators he ever saw.

Pretty soon he sort of waggled his head as if he was shaking a fly off his nose, and says, "Well, we can't do any m-more about that to-day. Besides, we've got this Pekoe on our hands. Rock, turn around gradual, like there

wasn't any reason for it, and tell me how many windows from the back yours is."

"It's the fourth, on the second floor," says Rock.

"All right. Now which s-s-side of you did that noise come from, or was it r-right straight on top?"

"Sounded like it was almost over my head. It may have been to one side. I was pretty excited, you know. Come to think about it, it might have been a *little* toward the front of the house."

Mark got up slow and went into the grape-arbor. When he got inside we saw him turn around, back in the shadows where nobody could see him from the house, and look careful up toward the windows on the third floor.

He wasn't gone but a minute. Then he came waddling out and says: "He's in a room with the blinds shut. Fifth window from the back. Blinds closes t-t-tight. That's what makes me think he's there. Maybe they're n-nailed."

I sneaked a look, and sure enough, the window he was talking about did have its blinds closed. That made it hard for anybody inside to see out, and impossible for anybody outside to see in, or to make any signals or anything.

"Fine chance," says I, "of getting at anybody up there. There ain't a ladder in town that 'll reach him."

"There's things b-besides ladders," says Mark. "Say, Binney, if you was s-shut in a room, and something came and rapped on your window like this, *rap-rap-rap*, then *rap-rap-rap*, what would you think?"

"I'd think somebody was doin' it to make me take notice," says I.

"That's what this Pekoe would t-t-think," says Mark.

"But," says I, "you can't reach him. If you tried it with a long pole Jethro 'd catch you at it."

"Yes," says Plunk, "and if you tried it by throwing stones, he'd catch you at that too."

"Maybe," says Mark. "But I got a d-d-dodge that 'll work, maybe, and Jethro won't see it, either. Let's all git into the arbor where we can't be seen."

We went in and Mark asked if Plunk and I had our sling-shots. We had, because we always had them along. You can never tell when you may need a sling-shot in your business.

"Now," says Mark, "here's the notion. We shoot at Pekoe's window. I shoot, then Plunk, then Binney. One, two, three. L-l-like that.

Then stop a m-minute, and do it right over—one, two, three. See? Jethro won't be able to see *that*," says he.

"Go ahead," says I, getting a good stone in the leather, and another in my hand to be ready for the second volley.

Mark shot, then Plunk, then me. *Pat-pat-pat*, the three stones sounded. Then we did it again. *Pat-pat-pat*. After that we waited with our eyes glued to the window, and our ears, too. Pretty soon we heard a noise like glass breaking, and then Pekoe, if it *was* Pekoe, began pushing and banging at the blinds.

"Hope he don't make too m-m-much noise," says Mark.

It seemed like he couldn't open the blinds, so they must have been nailed or fastened somehow, and they were strong, heavy blinds, but he could work the shutters up and down so as to get a better look outside, and we could see his fingers reaching through. We knew he must have his eyes right there, looking, so Mark went to the door of the arbor and stood there quiet. Pekoe couldn't miss seeing him any more than he could miss seeing the new post-office in town if he was standing right in front of it. That's one good thing about being fat—it's easy for folks to see you when you want them to. But,

on the other hand, it's hard to hide from folks you want to keep away from.

Mark looked at the house careful, but Jethro wasn't in sight.

"Rock," he says, "you and Plunk go to the kitchen and yell to Jethro that you're hungry. If he comes, one of you back over to that kitchen window there and waggle your hand behind you."

Off they went, and pretty soon Plunk showed up in front of the window and waggled his hand. So we knew Jethro was in there where he couldn't see. Then, quick as a wink, Mark looked up at the window and waggled *his* hand. The man inside saw it, because he shoved as much of his hand through the shutters as he could, and wiggled it as hard as he could wiggle. Mark nodded his head.

Plunk was still standing in the kitchen window, so we knew Jethro was there yet. Mark gave a look, and then started making letters with his fingers. You know that sort of deaf and dumb alphabet that every boy in the United States can use if he wants to—mostly behind his geography in school. Well, that's what Mark was doing now. He was trying to talk to Pekoe.

"Is your name Pekoe?" he spelled out as slow

as time. Then he spelled out, "If you can read what I say wiggle one finger."

Just one finger came through the blinds and wiggled.

"Are you a friend of Rock's? If you are show two fingers," Mark signaled.

Two fingers came into sight.

"If you know who he is, and why he's kept here, show two fingers again. If you don't know, show one finger."

Just one finger came through.

"I wonder what he's g-g-got to do with it, then," says Mark to me.

And then Plunk and Rock and Jethro all came around the corner of the house, and Mark didn't dare make another move. We didn't stay long after that, because we had a lot of work at the *Trumpet* office, so we went along. But we promised Rock we'd be back next day, some of us, and for him to lay low and not to try monkeying with Pekoe unless he got a good chance and was sure Jethro wasn't around.

While we were walking home Mark says, "P-p-perty good day's work. Got the worst part of Mr. Wigglesworth's writing f-f-figgered out, and had a l-little chat with Pekoe."

"There's some bridges to cross yet," says I.

"Yes," says he, "but we'll cross 'em. You *bet*."

CHAPTER XVIII

MY, how those Home Culturers and Literary Circlers did work to get subscriptions for us. I never would have believed it, and how any of them had time to cook their husbands' meals, or wash their kids' faces, I don't see. Probably they didn't, for little things like keeping house wouldn't matter when there was a contest on to see who had the most brains.

Old Grandma Smedley claimed both clubs didn't have any brains or they wouldn't be fussing with such things. "I calc'late," says she, "that I'm the only woman in town that's got even common sense. If a woman wants dumb foolishness in the family she don't have to do it herself. Her husband's always ready." But what she said didn't matter; the contest went on just the same.

The rules of the contest were that the money had to be paid right in with a subscription before it counted, and the first thing Mark and us fellows knew we had quite some considerable

of a bank account. You get forty-odd women hustling for subscriptions at a dollar and a quarter apiece, and it don't take long to have the money mount up.

While the subscriptions were coming in we didn't forget the advertising, you can bet. Mark figured out arguments for us to shoot at the merchants, and they worked pretty good. Every week we carried more advertising than we ever had before, just because we had convinced business men how interested everybody was in the *Trumpet* just now while the contest was going on, and how everybody was reading it. The business men could see that for themselves, because *they* were reading it, and their wives were reading it.

"Let's see," says Mark, "how much we *m-might* make a year out of this paper if this contest b-brought our subscription list up to f-fifteen hunderd. The subscriptions would amount to eighteen hunderd and seventy-f-five dollars. Then our regular advertisin' that we could f-figger on here in Wicksville and the county 'll fetch about seventy-five dollars a week, or even up to a hunderd, if we're real lucky. As soon as we git enough s-subscribers I'm goin' after some out-of-town advertisin'. I see a lot of it in good country

p-papers. We'll git some of that, and our job work amounts to quite a bit the way it's been comin' in. Looks to me like we ought to make this p-paper show a profit of, anyhow, two thousand d-dollars a year, and maybe more."

"Countin' chickens before they're hatched," says I.

"We're hatchin' 'em fast," says he.

"Spragg may bust up the nest," says I, "and drive off the settin' hen."

"Spragg hain't got real d-dangerous *yet*," says he, "but we'll have to pay him some attention perty quick."

"Seems like we ought to get somethin' more to do to take up our time," says I. "We hain't busy enough. Nothin' to do but run a contest that's close to bein' a civil war, and git advertisin' and write the news and *git* the news, and scare up advertisements, and tend to Spragg, and monkey around with Rock's mix-up. If, maybe, we could buy a three-ring circus and be all the acts, includin' the menageric, and then have school start up to give us somethin' to do daytimes, I guess we'd keep from gettin' lonesome."

Mark grinned, and says he was going to get somebody to help Tecumseh Androcles in the shop, but how that helped *us* I didn't see.

Well, as I was saying, those women combed the town and country for subscriptions, until it got so that anybody who hadn't subscribed for the *Trumpet* was as popular as a little girl coming to school with a box of candy. All you had to do was to stand in front of the post-office and mention that you hadn't subscribed for the paper yet, and right off you'd be asked by one woman to go driving with her, and by another to come to dinner, and by another if you wouldn't like a batch of her raised biscuits. I dunno what a feller could have got out of not having subscribed yet if he held out long enough, but I guess most of 'em got their money's worth. For when you get a paper for a year, and two or three invitations to dinner, and buggy rides, and auto rides, and fresh pies sent over, and all that sort of thing, why, it would be a mean man that wasn't satisfied.

Mark sat down at his desk and started writing letters. I guess he wrote a dozen and put them in the envelopes and stamped them.

"Who's goin' to git all the mail?" I says.

"Diff'rent folks," says Mark, the way he always speaks when he intends to keep something to himself. "I'm just writin' around to git a l-l-little information."

"Thought you had all there was," says I.

"Keep cool, Binney," says he. "Your strong point hain't sarcasm. Let's go out to see Rock."

We two went out and we expected maybe Rock would have something exciting to tell us, but he didn't. It seems like nothing at all had happened. He hadn't seen a thing of Pekoe, and hadn't heard him much.

"Funny," says Mark, "that you don't know anything about this Pekoe, Rock, when it was him that b-brought you here."

"Not when you know how I've always lived," says Rock. "Why, I haven't seen my father since I was a baby! I don't even remember what he looks like. He wrote me once in a while, but his letters didn't tell much. About all there was in them was that he would come home some day."

"You don't suppose this Pekoe is him, do you?"

"I *know* he isn't," said Rock, as positive as could be.

"But your father sent him," says I.

"He didn't say," says Rock.

"What made you g-go off with him, then?"

"There wasn't anything else to do."

Well, we were stumped right there. It was a sure thing that this Pekoe knew something we

ought to know, but it looked like he might as well be in China as where he was, for all the good it did us. It made Mark Tidd mad.

"We're goin' to t-t-talk to Pekoe," says he, "and we're goin' to do it right off."

"I'm willin'," says I, "but I hain't got any wings to fly up to his window."

"And Jethro might not like to see a boy flying around the yard like a bird, anyhow," said Rock, making the first thing that sounded like a joke that I ever heard him try. It wasn't much of a joke when you come to think of it, but it was encouraging.

"I wish Plunk and Tallow was here," says Mark.

"I'll git 'em," says I, and off I went, running as hard as I could. It didn't take long to grab onto the fellows and hustle back. When we got there Mark and Rock had their heads together like they were making up a scheme.

"Plunk," says Mark, "you and Tallow are g-g-goin' to have a fight. A noisy fight. You got to slam-bang into each other like all git out."

"G'wan!" says Tallow.

"He knows I kin lick him," says Plunk.

"If Mark Tidd wants any fightin' done he kin do it himself," says Tallow.

Mark didn't say anything till Tallow was through spluttering. Then he says: "Jest wait a m-minute till I tell you about it. I've got to talk to this Pekoe. It hain't any easy job to do it, and it won't be possible if you don't help. That's where the f-f-fight comes in. I want you to go back by the barn and start a reg'lar rip-snortin' rumpus that can be heard to Jericho. It 'll attract Jethro right out of the house to see what's goin' on. While he's gone Binney and I will sneak up-stairs. Rock 'll keep w-w-watch at the foot of the third-floor and make a noise to warn us if Jethro 's comin'. See? You hain't goin' to back down on me, be you?"

"No," says Tallow, "but I wisht you'd find somethin' for me to do where I wouldn't get all mussed up. Plunk gets too doggone int'rested when he goes to fightin'. Seems like he don't know the difference between foolin' and bein' in earnest."

"So much the better," says Mark. "It 'll look real to Jethro."

"It 'll look real to Plunk," says Tallow, short-like, but Plunk just grinned. He sort of liked fights.

Tallow and Plunk went off to the other side of the house like Mark told them. I wished

I could have watched the row, because I'll bet it would have been a bully scrap. The way the fellows looked when we saw them again made me sure of it. Both of 'em looked as if they'd been in a boiler explosion that had blown them into the middle of a cyclone mixed up with an earthquake. It was just my luck.

Mark and Rock and I waited till we heard Plunk shout as loud as he could, "You did say it, too. I heard you. What you mean talkin' about me like that?"

Tallow yelled right back at him, "I calc'late I kin say what I want to, and if you don't like it you can lump it."

"I've a notion," says Plunk, "to hit you so hard your head 'll bust like a bad egg."

"Hit ahead," says Tallow. "I dare you to. You dassent. You couldn't bust an egg anyhow—not if you *jumped* on it. Looky here. Here's a chip on my shoulder. You dassent knock it off. Jest touch it with your finger, that's all. Jest brush it off, if you're lookin' to go to the hospital."

"I'll knock it off," says Plunk. "You bet I will. Have I got to chase you all over the yard to do it? Huh! Jest gimme one *lick* at you, and that 'll be all—just one good lick. . . . There goes your old chip."

Spang! Tallow swatted at him, and in a second they were at it. Usually when a fellow gets to fighting in earnest he's too busy with his fists to have much time for hollering, but the way Tallow and Plunk yelled and dared each other was a caution. I don't see how they managed it.

"Good kids," says Mark. "L-l-listen to 'em. That ought to fetch Jethro."

It did. In a minute out came Jethro to see what the racket was about, and as soon as he came, the three of us slid in the side door. You bet we were pretty spry about it. Rock knew the way, and he hustled some. We stuck right to his heels. We almost jumped to the top of the first flight of stairs, and would have jumped the next but our wind was getting short. Rock stopped at the bottom of that flight.

"Cough," says Mark, "if Jethro comes this way."

"All right," panted Rock, and up we went.

All the doors on that floor were shut, but we knew Pekoe's door must be on the left side of the hall and three or four doors from the back of the house. Mark tried the fourth door, rapping on it three times soft, and then three times again.

"Who's there?" says a voice.

"Are you Mr. Pekoe?" says Mark.

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Friends of Rock's. We haven't much time. Got Jethro out of the w-w-way for a minute and sneaked up. We're helpin' Rock. There's some kind of a mystery about him, and we're solvin' it. We got to know what *you* know."

"Don't go too fast, young feller," says Pekoe. "I don't know you yet, and I hain't talkin' to anybody that inquires. Maybe you was sent by the feller that shut me up here."

"We weren't. Rock's with us. He's standin' at the f-f-foot of the stairs, watchin'. It was us that s-s-shot at your window yesterday, and it was me that t-t-talked deaf and dumb with you."

"Oh," says Pekoe. "What do you want to know? Why don't you let me out first?"

"We can't," says Mark. "Why don't you get out?"

"I'm no sparrow," says Pekoe. "It's three stories down and them blinds is nailed. I can't bust open the door. That Jethro didn't leave a thing in the room I could use to bust it down. There hain't a chair or a bed in here. Nothin' but a mattress and some quilts. What kin a feller do with them?"

"Not much," says Mark. "And we can't do

anythin' now. But we'll git you out. Rock's the m-m-main consideration now. You f-fetched him here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I got a letter from his father tellin' me to git him at the school he was at and fetch him here."

"Why?"

" 'Cause his father was down with some kind of sickness in Central America and figgered he was goin' to die. The letter was two months old when I got it. It jest said he was goin' to die, and to get his son and take him to Henry Wigglesworth in Wicksville."

"What made his father send you?" Mark says.

"Because him and me was pals in lots of places, and because he knew he could trust me to do what he asked. We been in a lot of pinches together."

"Why was you to t-t-take Rock to Mr. Wigglesworth?"

"I dunno. Big Rock never told me."

"Is Rock's father's n-n-name Rock, too?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

"Rock Armitage," says Pekoe.

"Huh!" says Mark in a sort of disappointed tone. Then in a second he says: "What made you come back again? And how did the Man With the Black Gloves know you was comin' so as to l-l-lay for you?"

"I come back because—"

Just then Rock began to cough like the mischief, and we dassent stop, but rushed right to the stairs. Rock looked up and motioned us back, and we could hear Jethro coming up the stairs from the ground floor. Rock hadn't signaled us quick enough so we could get down, and there we were, caught on the top floor of that house without any chance I could see but what we'd be caught by Jethro, and then there'd be a fine mess of fish.

But Mark he never stopped to think. He just grabbed my arm and hauled me back along the hall. We stopped back from the stairs and heard Jethro ask Rock what he was doing there, and Rock said he was just going to his room for something. And then Jethro started up to the third floor.

Well, if he got to the top of those stairs he'd see us, for there wasn't anything to hide us. Mark reached out quick and tried a door. It wasn't locked, thank goodness, and he jerked it open and in we popped. It was a stairway

leading up to the attic or something, and you'd better believe we went up some fast and considerable quiet.

"Huh!" I whispered when we were up there. "We're in a lovely boat now. Four stories up."

"I dunno," says Mark. "It might be worse."

"Yes," says I, "we might be up *eight* stories."

"Anyhow," says he, "we're in the h-h-house."

"Yes," says I, "and like to stay in it."

CHAPTER XIX

WE found out we were in a big attic that covered the whole of the house. Part of it was floored over and part of it was just joists with the lath and plaster showing on the under side. It looked as if there was about an acre in it, and it was full of angles and brick chimneys and little, funny-shaped windows, and rubbish, and trunks and goodness knows what—except things to eat.

We were there, and no chance of getting out right away, so the idea of getting something to eat was one that came pretty quick. It went about as soon as it came.

"Guess we'll have to gnaw air," says I, kind of down-hearted.

"L-l-lucky," says Mark, "if Jethro don't gnaw us."

"What 'll Plunk and Tallow do when we don't show up?"

"Nothin', I hope," says Mark. "Rock 'll f-find some way to tell 'em we're penned up

here, and I guess they'll have sense enough to do n-nothin' but hang around to see what t-turns up."

"They'll hang around," says I. "You couldn't drive 'em away. Don't think they'd sneak off and leave us, do you?"

"Not them," says Mark, and the way he said it would have sounded pretty good to Tallow and Plunk if they had heard. It showed that Mark *knew* them, and was sure he could depend on them no matter what happened.

"L-let's rummage around," says Mark.

We stirred things up good, because Mark said you never could tell what you were going to find in an attic, and if there was anything there to throw any light on Rock's affairs, why, we wanted to know it. There were trunks and boxes of old clothes, and busted chairs, and piles of old magazines and books, and hats, and shoes. You could find 'most anything you didn't want there, but not much you did want, unless you was figuring on dressing up for a masquerade.

Over in a corner, though, I found a little rocking-chair for a baby, and what was left of a doll's house and some busted toys.

"Look here," says I. "I wonder what Mr. Wigglesworth was doin' with these kid things. Didn't have any that I ever heard of."

"No," says Mark, but his eyes began to shine

like everything. "Not that we heard of. Maybe, Binney, there's n-n-nothin' to this, but maybe it's the m-most important thing we've run onto in this whole business."

"How?" says I.

"B-because," says he, "it makes it l-look as if what I was hopin' was so might be so."

"Um!" says I. "How int'restin'."

Well, we kept on digging into things, and after a while Mark hauled out one of those old-fashioned photograph-albums that fasten with a brass catch in front. It wasn't a big plush one, like we got to home on the center-table, but a little leather one about six inches long and four wide and two thick. We went over by a window and looked through it. My! but it was comical—the clothes folks used to wear, and the faces they wore when they went to have their pictures taken!

We looked at every picture careful. Along at the front we recognized Mr. Wigglesworth when he was a young man, with Burnside whiskers and funny pants, and his hair all plastered down in front and combed up on the side. After a few pages was another picture of a young woman sitting on a rock with Mr. Wigglesworth standing behind her with his hand on her shoulder.

"Look at that!" says Mark, excited as a bantam rooster. "He was married. See? B-b-bet that p-picture was taken on their weddin' trip. It's a weddin'-trip-lookin' picture," says he.

"Yes," says I, "it sure looks foolish."

"Hum!" says he. "This is important."

"Good," says I.

But the next picture—that was what startled both of us, for—maybe you won't believe it—but it was the Man With the Black Gloves, only about twenty years younger than he is, and not wearing the gloves, but just as mean and ornery-looking then as he is now.

"There," says Mark, "I g-guess when we leave here we t-take this album along."

"Why?" says I.

"All those p-pictures," says he, "has the names of the photographers on 'em, and the p-places where they was taken. We can go there or write there, and t-trace back somethin' about Mr. Wigglesworth's family."

But we hadn't seen all the album yet. There was, farther on, a picture of Mrs. Wigglesworth (at least we guessed it must be Mrs. Wigglesworth) with a baby on her lap, and Mark was like to jump out of his skin.

"I knew it m-must be," says he. "We're gettin' hot," says he.

After that came a lot of pictures of a kid—a girl, and she kept getting older and older, until the last one showed she was maybe eighteen or nineteen, somewheres around there—about as old as a school-teacher, maybe. And then there wasn't any more of her, and there wasn't any more of Mrs. Wigglesworth, either.

But Mark was satisfied. "Look at that last p-picture," says he. "Who d-does it resemble?"

"Nobody I kin see," says I.

"All right," says he; "jest wait."

"I hain't got anythin' else to do," says I, "so I might 's well."

He stepped back and almost went off of the floor and stepped on the lath and plaster between the joists.

"Look out!" says I. "You'll go right through."

He slapped his knee. "Right t-through!" says he. "Ain't we fat-heads? Say, Pekoe's room's over about there, hain't it?" says he, pointing across the attic.

"Somewheres," says I.

"Anyhow," says he, "we hain't been wastin' time."

He went to the back of the house and paced off toward the front.

"I calc'late Pekoe's room is about under here," says he, and got down on his knees and began

working cautious at the plaster between two laths with his knife. He picked and picked, and at last got a hole through about as big around as a lead-pencil, then he got down on his stummick and looked through it.

"Mr. Pekoe," says he.

"What?" says Pekoe's voice, kind of muffled-like.

"We're h-here," says Mark, "up in the attic. Jethro's got us cornered, but he don't know it."

"That's where you're ahead of me," says he; "Jethro's got me cornered and he *does* know it."

"Tell me all you know about Rock and his f-f-father," says Mark.

"Don't know much about Rock," says Pekoe, "except that his father always kept him in school, and sometimes had pretty hard work to find the money to pay for it. Mostly Big Rock was in South America or Alaska or Burma or Africa or somewheres, trying to find a gold mine or a diamond mine, or somethin'. He never got to the United States at all. He wasn't a feller that talked much, but when it came to *actin'*, well, you can bet he was right there. There never was a squarer pal than Big Rock, and there's men that loves him from Nome to Cape Town."

"Where was Rock's m-m-mother?"

"Big Rock never mentioned her, but I knew she was dead. Been dead since Rock was a little baby. Guess that's why Big Rock went to globe-trottin'."

"You don't know her name?"

"Never heard it."

"And Big Rock's d-dead now?"

"Not by a jugful," says Pekoe. "I thought he was, and he thought he was goin' to be, but I got a letter from him a week ago, and he says he got over that sickness, and for me not to take Rock to Wicksville if I hadn't, and if I had, to git him back again, because he didn't want the boy to go there while he was alive. He says he didn't want to be beholdin' to a man while there was a chance of keepin' away from it. The way he wrote made me think he had some sort of a grudge ag'in' this Mr. Wigglesworth."

"And that's all you know?"

"Every livin' thing," says he.

"All right," says Mark. "Now we won't t-talk any more, 'cause Jethro might hear. We're g-goin' to git away, and we'll git you away as soon as we kin. I guess things is g-goin' to happen around here perty sudden."

"Hope so," says Pekoe. "They would happen sudden if Big Rock was to show up."

"Good-by," says Mark, "till we see you again."

"Now," says I, "let's figger on how we're goin' to escape from the dungeon."

" 'Tain't a d-dungeon," says Mark. "We're shut up in the tower of the Knight we've been f-fightin'. There's men-at-arms crowdin' all around, and the drawb-bridge is up and the moat's full of water. I guess he's holdin' us for ransom."

"If I don't git somethin' to eat perty soon," says I, "he won't have anythin' *to* ransom."

"Food," says Mark, "hain't to be thought about in sich circ'mstances. Here we be shut in the same t-tower with the young Duke that we're liegemen of, and his father's retainer, the Knight Pekoe. What's food compared with sich things?"

"Even a Duke," says I, "wouldn't be much good if he didn't eat for a week or two. I guess they'd be lookin' for a new Duke to take his job."

"The b-best of it," says Mark, "is that the Duke's secret is hid in this Castle Wigglesworth. If we could git it we could rescue the Duke and the Knight would wish he hadn't ever been born."

"You hain't figgerin' on tryin' to follow up

that paper thingumbob of Mr. Wigglesworth's, be you?"

"We're inside the castle," says Mark, "and the enemy don't know it. Never have a b-better chance to snoop around, if we wait till after dark."

"Without nothin' to eat," says I.

He jest sniffed.

"And," says I, "with the risk of this Knight Jethro findin' us snoopin'."

"You hain't s-s-scairt, be you?" says he.

"I hain't what you'd call easy in my mind," says I.

"All right," says he. "If that's the way you f-f-feel, we'll jest escape, and I'll git Plunk or Tallow to come back with me when we can git a chanct."

"You won't," says I, "because so long as I'm here I might as well stick. If them kids can do it, I guess I can."

"I knew you would, Binney," says he, which ended that. I was elected to stay, hungry or no hungry, so I settled down and made believe I was eating an apple pie. But that didn't do much good. It just made me hungrier.

"Wish we could c-c-communicate with our faithful friends, the Knights Tallow and Plunk," says he.

"We can try," says I.

"There's a ladder l-leadin' to a trap door in the roof," says Mark. "Let's go up it and see what there is to see."

The ladder went up over in a front corner, and I scrambled up it first. Mark came right behind me. I unhooked the trap door cautious and shoved it up; then I poked my head through. There was a flat place about six feet square with a railing around it, and I knew we were on top of a sort of little tower on the front of the house.

"Come on," says I, "but keep down. We can hide behind this railin' here."

"'Tain't a railin'," says Mark, "it's a battlement."

That's the way with him. When he's playing a thing he *plays* it, and sticks to details. Everything you say or do has got to be the way it would be if what you was doing was real instead of make-believe. He was the greatest make-believer I ever saw.

We crawled out on the roof, and looked around pretty careful, I can tell you. Nobody was in sight for a while. Then we saw Rock in the yard, and after a while we saw Plunk and Tallow coming toward him. They stopped and talked with their heads close together.

"Our t-trusty friends," says Mark, "have found a way of t-talkin' to the young Duke."

"Yes," says I, "they're doin' it the usual way—with their mouths."

"We got to let them know we're h-h-here," says he.

"Yell at 'em," says I.

He just looked at me, and then got his slingshot out of his pocket and put a pebble in the leather. Then his eyes sort of twinkled, and he says, "If I hit where I aim, Plunk Smalley's g-g-goin' to git a s'prise."

Plunk's back was toward us, so I sort of guessed.

Mark aimed careful and let her fly. In a jiffy Plunk clapped his hand to the seat of his pants and let out a holler you could have heard in Illinoy. Then him and the others looked all around and Mark stuck up his head pretty slow, and then his hand, and waggled it.

Plunk and Tallow and Rock saw it, but they had sense enough not to waggle back. They knew Jethro might see them. So they just nodded their heads and made believe they was looking at something else.

"Now," says Mark, "we'll give 'em their orders."

"How?" says I.

"Write 'em," says he, "and chuck 'em over."

He got out his pencil and wrote a note that said:

FAITHFUL KNIGHTS:—The Knight Binney and me is safe. Our presence hain't known, and we got to talk with the prisoner Pekoe. In the tower where we're hid we found other secrets that is important to the young Duke. Tell him his father's alive, and is a great man, so the prisoner Pekoe says. We hain't going to escape till we see if we can get past the men-at-arms and the bad Knight Jethro, and hunt around in the dungeons under this castle to find out what the writing left by the Earl Wigglesworth leads to. You faithful knights stick around till you hear from us, but don't be seen. If we don't show up by midnight, you better wake up Lawyer Jones and tell him what has happened, and for him to come out with his men-at-arms to rescue us. If you hear three whistles inside go and bang like everything on the front door and holler fire. All in the young Duke's service,

MARK TIDD, KNIGHT.

Then he folded it and, making sure Jethro wasn't watching, let it flutter over the edge. It fell to the grass quite a ways off and pretty soon we saw the knights and the young Duke go over to it, and Tallow put his foot on it. After a while he sat down, and we saw him stuff it in his pocket. Then they all went over to the arbor and out of sight. We knew they were reading the note, and that they would stick just like Mark told them.

CHAPTER XX

ABOUT all we could do now until Jethro was safe in bed was to sit around and wish he'd go early. If I was going to pick out the worst job in the world, it would be a waiting job. I don't know why it is, but when you're waiting time goes along about a dozen times as slow as it does any other time. If it hadn't been for Mark Tidd and his make-believes I guess I'd have gone plumb crazy.

"Say," says I, after a while, "I know there's some sort of a mystery about Rock, but what d'you s'pect it is? From them photographs you was so glad to find I guessed maybe you figgered he was Mr. Wigglesworth's son."

"Shucks!" says he. "And you mustn't speak about the young Duke as Rock. 'Tain't respectful. Earl Wigglesworth's son! Shucks! Anybody could see that b-baby in the photographs was a girl. Besides, didn't this p-prisoner Pekoe say he was a son of the man called the

Big Duke, that's off huntin' for the Holy Grail or s-s-somethin' in far countries?"

"Sure," says I, "so he did."

We didn't say anything for a spell, and then I asked: "If the young Duke hain't a son of Earl Wigglesworth's, why was he fetched here? What int'rest did the Earl Wigglesworth have in him, anyhow?"

"That," says Mark, "is exactly what we got to f-f-find out. Hain't you s-satisfied with havin' a dandy mystery? Want to spoil it by s-s-solvin' it without any trouble? What good's a m-m-mystery unless it's mysterious?" says he.

That did sound reasonable.

"S'posin'," says Mark, "that the young Duke wasn't jest the Duke, but was entitled to be somethin' more. Maybe king or some job like that. And s'posin', while his father, the Big Duke, was off c-c-chasin' this Holy Grail, that enemies s-stole him away, and there wasn't any way to p-prove he was the rightful king. See? And s'posin' this Earl Wigglesworth he had somethin' to prove it by, but didn't dare to b-burn it up or anythin'. And when he come to die he r-r-repented his bad deeds. And then he wrote that p-p-paper showin' where the p-papers to prove the Duke was entitled to be king was hid. That's how I f-f-figger it. Now,

we faithful retainers of the Duke has got to r-recover them papers and fix it so's the Duke comes into what's rightfully hisn. Hain't that about it?"

"Shouldn't be s'prised," says I. "But seems to me like the Big Duke was mighty careless to go off chasin' that Grail, whatever *that* is, and leave his son layin' around loose for anybody to steal."

"These here chivalrous knights," says Mark, "was always doin' them foolish things. If they hadn't," says he, "there wouldn't have been any s-s-stories. Seems l-like every knight was a l-little crazy. All I ever read about did things that was so silly you'd lick a p-puppy for not knowin' better than they did."

"What's this Grail you was talkin' about?"

"It's a cup," says Mark, "and I guess it's a magic cup or somethin', near's I kin judge. It's got a way of wanderin' around all by itself and hidin' away. Feller named Galahad up and f-found it once. His dad's name was Launcelot, and he was the biggest knight that ever was."

"What did this Galy-had do with it?" says I.

"Oh," says Mark, "I calc'late he just *f-found* it—and let it go at t-t-that. Just like a knight. Spend a year l-lookin' for a thing, and when he f-finds it, instead of takin' it home

to put on the what-not and show to folks, he jest says, 'I spy,' and gallops off again."

"Looks silly," says I.

"Was s-silly," says he.

"Say," says I, after thinking the thing over a while, "it just come into my head that us fellers was pokin' our heads into somethin' that didn't concern us. What we monkeyin' with this mystery for, anyhow?"

"Binney," says Mark, "you s'prise me. Hain't we newspaper men? Well! Hain't it the b-business of newspaper men to git the news?"

"You bet," says I.

"And won't the answer to this m-mystery be the b-biggest news ever p-printed in a Wicksville paper?"

"Guess so," says I.

"That's why we're after it," says he. "Besides," he says, "the young Duke's in t-trouble, and a feller that won't help another feller out when he's in t-trouble hain't much good."

Well, *that* was so.

Pretty soon it commenced to get dark, and from then the time went slower and slower. Neither of us had a watch, so we couldn't tell what time it was, and we decided to go up on top of the tower to listen if we could hear the

town clock in Wicksville. We kept on listening a long time, and then it struck. Eight o'clock, it said, and I would have been willing to bet a minute before that it was ten at least.

"If you wait l-l-long enough," says Mark, with a grin, "any l-length of time passes by."

I hadn't ever thought of that before, but you could see right off that it was so. Mark was always discovering new things.

That's how it happened now. We kept on waiting, and after a couple of years the town clock struck ten. Then we waited what we judged was a half an hour.

"Jethro ought to be in b-bed now," says Mark.

"If he's ever goin'," says I.

"T-take off your shoes," says Mark, which we both did, and crept down the attic stairs as quiet as a couple of cats. We opened the door into the second-floor hall pretty cautious, and listened. There wasn't a sound. Then we sneaked along the hall to the top of the stairs, and still we didn't hear a thing. I kept wishing we could hear a good, snorting snore, and then we'd be sure Jethro was out of the way.

After a minute we went down the first-floor stairs, and was just at the bottom and turning toward the back of the house when the front-

door bell rang. I 'most jumped out of my skin. We stood stalk still a second, and then we heard a sound in a room at the left like somebody getting up out of a chair.

"Quick!" says Mark, and he grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into a little sort of cubby-hole under the stairs.

And then out came Jethro, as big as life and natural enough to scare the life out of me. He marched right past us so close we could have touched him, and went to the door.

Well, sir, when we heard the man's voice that he let in you could have bought *me* for a peanut shuck. It was the Man With the Black Gloves. Mark pinched my arm.

Right then I says to myself that being a newspaper man was all right—if you kept on being one all in a healthy piece—but as for me, I'd rather be something else and safe in bed.

Jethro and the Man With the Black Gloves went right past us and into the library, where they lighted the lamp and left the doors open. The light shone right out into the hall, and they sat down facing the door, looking right out in our direction. We couldn't have moved out of that cubby-hole an inch without being seen. It was a dandy place to be, I don't think!

The worst of it was they talked low so we

couldn't hear a word they said, until at last the Man With the Black Gloves sort of raised his voice, angry-like, and says:

"We got to get that kid out of here. Right away."

That was all we heard, but Mark laid his fingers on my hand and pressed. I knew what he meant all right. What he meant was it was lucky we heard *that*, and we'd have to get awful busy awful quick.

After a while we made out another thing he said, which was, "The kid's father's dead. Central America. Months ago. No danger from him."

Well, we had later news about Big Rock than that. Then Jethro says: "This Pekoe don't know anythin'. There's nothin' he can tell the boy."

"But he can snoop around and get suspicious," says the Man With the Black Gloves, "and he's no man to fool with—not if he's been a partner of Big Rock Armitage."

"He wasn't sich a tough proposition to handle," says Jethro. "I done it alone."

"Huh!" says the Man.

"We might go and see what we kin git out of him," says Jethro.

"All right," says the Man, and up they got

and went tramping up the stairs right over our heads.

"N-n-now," whispered Mark, and out he ducked and headed for the back of the house. I was right on his heels, you can bet, and if the hall had been wide enough I'll bet I'd have beat him. I was anxious enough to get somewheres else than where I was. Any change looked like a big improvement to me.

We got into the kitchen, and because we didn't know the house very well inside, which Mark said was our fault and we ought to suffer for it, we had to prowl around a lot to find the cellar door. That took some time, because it was dark and we dassent make a light, and there were a dozen doors out of that big kitchen, and we had to open every one; we opened slow and cautious so it wouldn't squeak or anything.

At last we found steps going down. It was as black down there as a lump of charcoal, darker even than it was in the kitchen. But we had to go it blind. One step, two steps, we went, and then Mark Tidd says something startled-like, and all at once I heard the loudest, clangiest, bangiest kind of a noise and then another. Right in front of us! I like to have jumped clean out of my stockings.

Bang! Bang-bang! Clangety-dang-whang-bang!

something went, rolling and bumping downstairs ahead of us.

"What's that?" says I.

"It l-l-looks," says Mark, "like our f-finish." That was him all over. He could joke even when we were in a fix like that, and keep as cool as if nothing had happened at all.

"Did you kick somethin' over?" says I.

"Oh no," says he. "It j-just went for an evenin' stroll all by itself. Calc'late it was the sheet-iron wash-tub settin' here g-gossipin' with the boiler," says he.

"And Jethro 'll be here in a second gossipin' with us," says I.

We lighted a match then. It was time to hustle about as fast as we could hustle, and you can't do that when it's so dark you can't pinch your own nose and feel it, even if you could find your nose to pinch.

When the light flared up we found we were half-way down the stairs, and that the stairs went between two brick walls and didn't go right into the big cellar, but into a kind of little hall, and that there was a door about six feet from the bottom step. That led into the cellar.

We scooted for the door.

"G-good heavy door," says Mark. "Slam her s-shut."

I did, not worrying much about noise now, and then we both lighted matches to see what chances was standing around offering themselves to a couple of boys who wished they was off in Africa or at the North Pole instead of in Mr. Wigglesworth's cellar.

The room we were in was a big one, the whole width of the house. Toward the front of the house was a brick wall, with doors in it that led to other parts of the cellar. The door we came through was the only one into the room from the back.

"B-b-barricade the door," says Mark, and we set to work piling things against it. There were quite a few heavy things there, which was our first piece of luck that night, and the way we pulled and hauled and jerked them in front of that door would have done your heart good. In three minutes it would have taken an elephant to push it open.

"There," says Mark, "n-now we got to see if there's another stairway down here."

We scurried into the other parts of the cellar, but there wasn't another stairs. Anybody that got us now would have to come the way we did, or through a window, and the cellar windows were little, narrow ones that neither Jethro nor the Man With the Black Gloves could have got through to save their lives.

We were safe for a while, anyhow.

"Here's a lamp," says I; "let's light her up. Somehow I feel easier in my mind when it hain't pitch dark."

"Go ahead," says Mark, so I lighted up, and just then somebody came pounding down the stairs and stumbled over the tin things that had given us away, and banged against the door.

Of course the door wouldn't open.

"Somebody in here," yelled Jethro. "They got the door fastened."

"Bust it," says the Man With the Black Gloves.

Jethro tried that, but we didn't worry much, knowing what was against it.

"Can't budge it," says he.

There wasn't a sound for a minute. Then the Man called out:

"Hey, inside there! Who are you and what d'you want?"

Mark pinched my arm and motioned to keep still.

"Come out of there," says Jethro, and I felt like giggling. Not that I wasn't afraid. Whee! I should say I was afraid. The chills that was running up and down my back was enough to freeze my spine into an icicle.

"They can't g-get at us," says Mark. "Let's

use what t-time we got to see if we can trace out the rest of Mr. Wigglesworth's writin'. The last part of it says, 'In. Down.' We're *that* all right. Then it says, 'What color is a brick? Investigate.' That comes next. What color *is* a brick, Binney?"

"Brick color," says I.

"No?" says he. "G'wan! I thought it was the color of a orange blossom."

"Red, then," says I. "Most of 'em is."

"This cellar's b-built of red brick," says he.

"Sure," says I.

"Then," says he, "it's safe to s-s-say this s-secret's got somethin' to do with these bricks here."

"Yes," says I.

"Git the lamp," says he, which I did. We felt all over for loose bricks and things like that. Sort of figgered we'd find a hiding-place somewheres, but we didn't, and all the time Jethro and the Man were doing their best to get the door open.

"Hustle," says I.

"What's the use?" says he. "We can't git out any more 'n they kin git in."

Pretty soon Mark says, "Color's got somethin' to do with it, too. Bricks and color," says he.

He grabbed the lamp and went all around the room. All at once he stopped and called soft to me. "Binney!"

"Yes," says I.

"Look," says he.

I looked where he was pointing, and up toward the top of the wall was a brick that wasn't brick color! It was a pale-complected brick—almost white.

"What color is a brick?" says Mark, and heaved a big sigh of relief.

"Kin you reach it?" says I.

"No," says he. "Here, step on my back."

He stooped over, and I stepped where he told me. It was like standing on a platform to speak a piece, his back was so broad. I thought a little of the feller in the *Arabian Nights* that got off on an island and built a fire, and then the island dived, because it was a whale. Only Mark didn't dive.

I reached up and fumbled with the brick. It was wedged pretty tight, but it wasn't plastered. I got a holt of the edge with my nails and wiggled and monkeyed with it, till it came out, and then I shoved my arm back into the hole that was left—and my fingers touched something that felt like a big envelope full of something. I hauled it out and jumped down.

"There," says I, "we got somethin', but much good it's likely to do us."

Mark was almost jumping up and down he was so tickled. He held the envelope up to the light, and read on it, "Take this envelope to Lawyer Jones or some other trustworthy lawyer."

"Jest what I'd 'a' done, anyhow," says he.

Then he stuffed the paper inside of his shirt, and stuck his fingers in his mouth and whistled three times. When Jethro and the Man heard that they stopped working at the door, but when nothing else happened they went at it again.

We waited, too. Quite a while went past, and the only thing we heard was Jethro and the Man.

"Can't be Plunk and Tallow has deserted us," says I.

"N-n-never," says Mark—and just then we heard an awful kicking and pounding on the front door, and jangling of the bell in the kitchen, and the fellers' voices hollering, "Fire! Fire! Fire!" as tight as they could.

"Good kids," says Mark. "Git ready, Binney." Ready was somethin' I'd been for several hours.

CHAPTER XXI

WE heard Jethro and the Man With the Black Gloves dash up-stairs, and they hadn't hit the top step before Mark and I began clearing away the door so we could get out. It didn't take us long, you bet, and it didn't take us long to open the outside door and get out into the yard.

"A-arbor," says Mark, and we made for that as tight as we could go. Plunk and Tallow had quit hollerin' fire, and in a minute along they plunged and came right in on top of us.

"Where's Rock?" says Mark. "See him?"

"No."

"We're s-safe," says he. "Let's see if we can't rescue the young Duke. I guess he's goin' to need rescuin' perty quick."

"There's a light in his room," says I.

"Let him know we're here," says Mark, and I whanged a stone out of my sling-shot right through the open window. Rock stuck his head out.

"I'm goin' to sneak over in the shadow," says I, "and tell him to come down."

Off I went, not waiting for anybody to say anything, and got to the house all right. There was plenty of bushes and things to hide behind, and when I got there I called Rock, cautious.

"Yes," says he.

"Come and git rescued," says I.

"Mark and Binney got out safely?" says he.

"You bet," says I, but I didn't mention the papers we found behind the white brick.

"I never could get past Jethro down the stairs," says he.

"Stairs," says I, "was made for folks to walk up and down on—not for folks to escape on. What would be the fun of escapin' jest by walkin' down a flight of steps? Any adventure in that? Why," says I, "Mark Tidd would be disgusted if you escaped that way!"

"What 'll I do, then?" says he.

"Jump," says I.

"I need all my arms and legs," says he.

Just then something dropped on me, and I heard Jethro growl like a bear that he had me. He needn't 'a' told me; I knew it. Of course I did what I could to get away, and threw myself back and squirmed and kicked and thrashed. But he hung on. I was on the ground and he

was leaning over me. All at once I heard a thump and a big grunt out of Jethro, and he let go of me and keeled over, making funny snuffling noises, like his wind was knocked out. Which it was, for Rock had seen what was going on, and he'd hung by his hands from the window-sill and dropped kerslam right onto the back of Jethro's neck.

He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me up.

"Run!" says he, and we ran. I rather guess we ran. Before Jethro got his breath back we had a good start, and in the dark it was enough. He came plunging and yelling after us, but we took to the shadows and dodged and wriggled through the hedge and made up the road. He didn't have any more chance to catch us than an angle-worm has to catch a rabbit.

When we knew we had him beaten good we stopped and hid alongside of the road to wait for Tallow and Plunk and Mark. It was quite a while before they came along, and then they didn't come by the road, but back through the fields and wood-lots. I then whistled out a signal whistle. Mark answered it, so I knew it was our fellows, and in a minute we got together.

"N-now for home," says Mark. "I'll take Rock to the house. You f-fellers keep quiet about everythin' that's happened. I'll give out to-morrow that Rock's a f-friend come to visit me."

That's how it was. Mark stopped on his way home, late as it was, to pound on Lawyer Jones's door. Lawyer Jones was pretty mad when he woke up, and said some pretty descriptive things to Mark, but when Mark told him what was up he quieted right down, and him and Mark went inside for a few minutes. Then we all went home.

Next day Mark and Rock and I went to Lawyer Jones's and we all read that paper. Rock's eyes nearly popped out of his head, but Mark says he knew it all the while.

"Now, Lawyer Jones," says he, "it was the *Trumpet* that f-found this paper and got it. So the *Trumpet's* entitled to somethin', hain't it?"

"You bet," says Rock. "Whatever you want from *me*."

"All I want," says he, "is to have this kept quiet till after the paper comes out d-day after to-morrow. That 'll be the end of the contest, too, and the dinners and everything. And we can print this whole thing, and almost knock

the eyes out of folks with what's been goin' on right under their eyes, and them never knowin' it!"

"I guess," says Lawyer Jones, "that you're entitled to that much."

And so the mystery kept on being a mystery for a couple more days.

Mark got a lot of mail that day and spent most of the morning opening it and studying it. He didn't let on what he was up to and we knew better than to ask. Then he went out, and him and Tecumseh Androcles Spat talked and talked and figured. After that Mark came in and wrote all the afternoon, and then most of the evening, and as fast as he wrote Tecumseh and the young man we'd got to help him set up in type what Mark had written. Part of what he was doing was writing the story about Rock and the mystery, but most of it wasn't that at all. It was something quite different, as Mr. Spragg and the merchants that had gone into his daily-paper scheme found out.

And still the subscriptions came in. It was running close. The Home Culturers had four hunderd and thirty-four, and the Literary Circlers had four hunderd and twenty-nine. Of course nobody knew how many votes there were but just us fellows.

That night the first dinner, the Literary Circlers' dinner, came off, and you'd better believe it was good eating. Eat! Whee! I almost busted the band of my pants, and Mark! you wouldn't believe what that fat kid mowed away. I was sure I'd never be able to go to the dinner the next night and eat a bite. But I did. Of course we all took quite a lot of exercise during the day, and didn't eat much, to save space.

The Home Culturers' dinner looked to me like it was every bit as good as the Literary Circlers', but among other folks there was a lot of argument. I don't know but there might have been a real squabble if Constable Ginney hadn't been there with his star right outside of his coat, warning folks to keep the peace. He scared 'em.

The last day was a tough one for all the women in the contest. They worked like anything, both getting ready for the food show and hauling in the last subscriptions that were to be had. We were busy, too, and as the day moved along we began to get kind of worried. Goodness knows, when we saw how things was coming we had reason enough to worry.

Mark went out to get the last items of news before we went to press, and I went with him.

We saw the afternoon train come in, and there got off it Mr. Spragg, who grinned at us like the cat that ate the canary, and a whopping big man that was tanned and dark as an Indian. He went to the hotel, and Mark told me to go in and write what items I had while he went to the hotel to see if there was anything there. He didn't come back for quite a while, and I went out again. I passed the hotel and saw him talking to the big man, both of them as earnest as if they was planning to run off with the bank.

When Mark came back he looked all excited, and fidgeted around as if it was hard for him to hold himself in. It was easy to see something had happened.

"Well?" says I.

"If I was to t-t-tell you now," says he, "it would spile a m-mighty fine s'prise for you," says he.

"Huh!" says I. "I'd rather suffer from a spoiled surprise," I says, "than to be worn to the bone by curiosity."

"I'll take a chance," says he.

"You hain't takin' any chance," says I. "You *know*."

"You b-bet I do," says he, and that was all I could get out of him.

"How about Pekoe?" says I. "Is he goin' to be left out at the farm forever?"

"Pekoe's comfortable," says he. "I guess he's about due to c-c-come to town."

Subscriptions straggled in all the afternoon, one at a time. The way the contest was turning out for us was great. We knew we'd have close to fifteen hunderd paid-up yearly subscribers, and Mark says every newspaper man in the world admits a country weekly can make good money with that many.

"But Spragg's daily?" says I.

"He can't t-t-take our subscribers away from us for a year," says he.

"He kin git the advertisin' with his co-operative scheme, though," says I.

"Maybe," says he, "and ag'in m-maybe not. I've been doin' a leetle f-figgerin' for Spragg's benefit—and for our own, too. We got to quit runnin' this paper perty soon and go back to school. Well?"

"Yes," says I, "what then?"

"Why," says he, "we got either to sell it or to hire an editor to run it."

"That's right," says I.

"Well," says he, "it l-looks to me l-like it would be the best idee to sell it."

"If we kin," says I.

"The f-fellers that's int'rested with Spragg has a meetin' to-morrow n-night," says he. "I'd l-like to know what 'll turn up."

"Spragg seems perty well pleased," says I.

"Spragg," says he, "would git along b-better if he done more thinkin' and less t-talkin'."

"Where's Rock?" says I.

"Down to the hotel," says Mark, with a funny look in his eye. "I don't calc'late we'll see Rock 'fore night."

"That's funny," says I.

" 'Tain't so funny as you m-might think," says he.

Tallow was keeping count of subscriptions, and every little while he'd come and tell us how many was in.

"Lit'ry Circlers is two ahead," says he, about four o'clock. The contest was goin' to close at five, so it looked like the Circlers had it. But in come Mrs. Bobbin with three more, and put the Culturers jest one ahead. That was all till the clock was 'most ready to strike, when in come Mrs. Strubber with one. One!

Mark and I looked at each other, and then we looked at Tallow and Plunk. It was a tie. Them women had got four hunderd and forty-six subscriptions for each club—and the fat was in the fire. Anything else could have happened

and made a little trouble, maybe, but to have this thing end up in a tie was to bring on a regular war.

"Mark," says I, "I guess I got to go out of town for a couple of days—over to Uncle Oscar's."

He grinned.

"We're up against it, Binney," says he, "but we got to stick it out."

"Let's give one of 'em an extry," says Tallow, "that 'll fix the tie."

"No," says Mark. "This t-t-thing has been run fair, and it 'll be f-f-finished fair. We'll take what's comin' to us, and git out of it the best we can. Anyhow," says he, beginning to shake all over, "it' ll be the f-funniest thing that ever happened in Wicksville."

"Yes," says I, "I'll bet we laugh like anythin' at it when our folks come to the hospital to tell us about it. A tie," says I. "Think of the row them women will make when they find out they're tied."

"I'm t-thinkin' about it," says Mark.

CHAPTER XXII

THERE wasn't anything for us fellows to do but to go through with the thing now. We couldn't very well duck out and then ever show our faces again in Wicksville. So right after supper we went down and opened up the hall where the food show was, and got things ready for the massacre. I kind of wished the times that Mark played games about would come back for a while. I mean when knights and such-like fellows went around with cast-iron nightgowns on so that you couldn't hurt them without you found the combination to the safe and got the door open. That's what Mark calls a mixed metaphor. It says what I mean, so I don't care what he calls it. Anyhow, I don't believe he knows what he's talking about.

Well, about seven o'clock the crowd began to come. They came in a jam. There was to be a program, and at the end of it the announcement was to be made who had won the contest. The program started up at eight o'clock, and

meanwhile all of us but Mark had been back at the *Trumpet* office, helping get out the paper. That was to be part of the evening's excitement, too.

Pretty soon folks began to get tired of the program and began to yell for the decision of the contest. It kept getting louder and louder, till Mark judged it was best to let them have it.

"I'll d-do it," says he. "I'm the one that t-thought it up, so I'll make the announcement and t-take what's comin'. You fellers better skip."

"Nix," I says. "We're goin' to be right with you."

"What you git we git," says Plunk.

We listened and could hear the folks stamping their feet and clapping and yelling.

"Who won? Who won?" they started to yell over and over.

"Here goes," says Mark, and out he went. We stuck right to his heels. The first thing I noticed, even in all that crowd, was Rock standing over at one side, and with a hand on his shoulder was the big man that we saw getting off the train. I nudged Plunk, and *he* looked, and Rock saw us and waved his hand.

Mark began. He made a regular speech, and

it kept getting longer and longer, because he hated to come to the point and announce that nobody had won and that it was a tie. But he had to at last, because folks began to holler again.

Finally he says, "T-this has been a wonderful contest, ladies and gentlemen. There hain't ever been sich a contest in Wicksville, and—if I got anything to d-d-do with it—there 'll never be another." I believed *that* all right.

"The l-ladies," says he, "has proved somethin'. They have p-proved that nobody in the world kin beat the wimmin of Wicksville—not even the wimmin of Wicksville themselves." He stopped and looked around, and though he was pretty uncertain in his mind, he grinned jest as calm as a cabbage.

"The number of subscriptions got by the Home Culturers," says he, "is four hunderd and f-f-forty-six."

There was yells and stamping from the Home Culturers.

"The n-number of subscriptions got by the Lit'ry Circlers is four hunderd and f-f-forty-six," says he.

There was yells and stamping, but all of a sudden they stopped, and somebody yelled, "What's that?"

"It's a tie," says Mark. "B-both got the s-same number."

For a minute folks jest looked at one another, and then Mrs. Strubber and Mrs. Bobbin jumped to their feet and began talking at once. I could catch sich words as "cheat," and "put-up job," and "crooked," and like that.

"L-ladies," says Mark, "you've kept count of how many subscriptions you got, hain't you?"

"Yes," says both of 'em.

"What's your count, Mrs. Strubber?" says he.

"We got the number you said, but *they* never did. Our number is right. But them wimmin —why, we must 'a' beat 'em by fifty."

"Mis' Bobbin," says Mark, "how do you make your c-count?"

"We make it same as yourn for us," says she, "but them Lit'ry Circlers didn't come within ninety of us. I *know*," says she.

"L-ladies and gentlemen," says Mark, "both ladies says their c-count agrees with mine. Both m-makes their n-number f-four hunderd and f-f-forty-six. I guess that shows this contest was on the s-square. If it wasn't d'you think I'd 'a' dared stand up here and announce it was a tie?"

"Don't see how you dared, anyhow," yelled

Uncle Ike Bond. "I wouldn't 'a' done it for a farm."

"What we goin' to do?" says Mrs. Strubber. "We can't leave this here undecided now. The town wouldn't never git over it. Somebody got to be the champeen."

"You bet," says Mrs. Bobbin, "and the Home Culturers has got to be it. I guess our husbands hain't goin' to stand around and let us git done out of our rights."

"I guess ourn hain't either," says Mrs. Strubber, and right there it sure looked like the furniture was going to get busted.

Then Mark got an idea.

"L-ladies," says he, "I got a way out of it. T-there's a man here that hain't subscribed. Git him up here, and let them two clubs argue him into t-takin' a subscription, and the side that gits him wins."

They thought that over a minute, and then agreed.

"Who's the man?" says all of them at once.

"Uncle Ike Bond," says Mark, with a little grin. "He's just got home from a visit."

"Uncle Ike! . . . Uncle Ike!" yelled everybody, and started to push the old 'bus-driver to the front.

"Hey!" says he. "Hey, Mark Tidd, what I

ever done to you I should be got into this? I hain't goin' to. No, siree. You don't git *me* decidin' no sich fight. I got respect for my skin. If I was to decide this here, why, I'd have to lick every husband on the side I was decidin' ag'in'. Not that I can't do it—but I hain't as spry and eager as I was once. No, siree," says he, and he made a jump sideways, and scrambled up onto the window-sill, with fifty folks grabbing after him, and out he jumped. Well, that finished *that*.

Mark was laughing inside like everything. "There's another m-man here," says he. "He's big enough so's nobody's husband 'll be anxious to t-t-tackle him. He's *doggone* big," says Mark, "and t-there he stands. Mr. Armitage is his n-name," says Mark.

Armitage!

You could have knocked me galley-west with a feather. I seen it all in a minute.

"Mr. Armitage," says Mark, "won't you s-s-step forward and—"

"Risk my life?" finishes up the big man that was standing by Rock. "Why," says he, "I'll step forward and say something, and when I get through maybe you ladies will be willing to let things stand as they are—and glad to."

He came surging up forward, and stood there, big and quiet, looking down on everybody.

"First," says he, "I want to tell you something about myself." It was funny, but they quieted right down and listened. Not a yell or a holler.

"After that," says he, "I want to read you a piece in the Wicksville *Trumpet*, the best country paper in America," says he, and at that Mark and us kids swelled all up.

"I'm a happy man," says he, "because, after a dozen years, I've got my son back again. In that dozen years," he says, "I've been working and fighting and starving and risking death for my son, but maybe it would have been better if I'd stayed home and got a job and been right by his side. But there was a time when I was sore in my heart because his mother died." He stopped just a second. Then he went on. "I couldn't bear to stay still, so I put my little son in a school and went off to Alaska. I thought I'd find gold there, but I didn't find enough. After that I went to South America and to Africa and to China, and all over the world, always keeping my son in schools, and not seeing him nor scarcely ever writing to him. But I loved him just the same—like a father ought to. But I was set on coming home

to him rich, so he'd be proud of me. That was wrong. I know it now. He'd have been proud of me anyhow, because he's that kind. Well, I thought I was dying, and sent a friend to take my son to a man that should have looked after him—and that man died, but I got well. To-day I came back and found my son, and saw him for the first time since he was in dresses. I found he had made friends, four friends, who had done for him more than I had ever done. These friends had worked for him. These friends had found him alone in a big house, practically a prisoner, not knowing who he was or why he was there. My boy was in a bad mix-up, I can tell you. And I was far away. Well, these four friends, just out of the goodness of their hearts, went to work, and solved the mystery that was surrounding my son, and proved who he was, and have put him in the way of being heir to a great deal of money. Not that *that* matters now, for I found my mine at last and have ten times as much as Mr. Wigglesworth—"

He stopped. "But here's to-day's *Trumpet*. Let me read to you the real story. Then I want to say to you ladies that this contest has come out just the way it should have. It has proved that neither side is better than the other. It

has proved that Wicksville ought to be proud of you, and that you ought to be so proud of each other that you'd join together and not be Home Culturers or Literary Circlers, but just one big club — The Wicksville Women's Club, with everybody a member and working hard for the benefit of the town and of everybody in it."

Then he read, slow and emphatic, the story of Rock. He read how we had found him, and about all we had done, and about the paper Mr. Wigglesworth left, and about how we had got the paper. And—this was news to all of us but Mark—that Rock was Mr. Wigglesworth's grandson, and Rock's mother was Mr. Wigglesworth's daughter, who had married Mr. Armitage against her father's will, and he wouldn't ever have anything to do with her again.

Well, people's eyes almost popped out of their heads when they heard what had been going on right under their heads. When Mr. Armitage was done reading he laid his hand on Mark's shoulder and says, "Here's the boy that puzzled it out."

"Binney and Plunk and Tallow did as m-m-much as me," says Mark.

"Yes," says Mr. Armitage, turning to us, "and I want to thank them, publicly, too. Four of the squarest, nerviest, cleverest boys I ever saw."

"And now," says he, "what do you ladies think? Won't it be better to have one big club, working for the good of everybody, than two clubs pulling against each other?"

Mrs. Strubber looked at Mrs. Bobbin and Mrs. Bobbin looked back; then—and there was streaks down their faces where the tears had been running—they got up all at once and walked toward each other and shook hands.

That ended *that.*

But us fellows had a hard time getting away. Everybody wanted to shake hands and have us tell about it, and taffy us, but we did wriggle through, with Rock and his father following us, and sneaked to the office. And there we had a regular reunion. I tell you Mr. Armitage was a fine man, and he had a mess of adventure stories to tell that just lifted the hair off from your head.

Best of it is he's going to live here with Rock on the Wigglesworth place.

We talked a long time, and then went home to bed.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN the newspaper was another piece that was interesting to a lot of people, besides the piece about Rock. It was one Mark wrote about a daily newspaper such as Spragg was trying to get up. Mark had written to everybody he could think of that would know about it, and got facts and figures, and set them right down in print where everybody could see.

He showed how much it would cost to *start* such a paper. He showed how much it would cost to run it a year, and how much it would have to be paid for advertising, and how much for subscriptions, and how many subscribers it would have to have to live at all.

Then he proved the thing that upset Spragg's apple-cart—that the merchants wouldn't get their advertising for nothing, but that they would have to advertise six days a week instead of one, and that, even dividing up what profits there were, the merchants would have to spend about five times as much as they ever had before, not

counting in what they put into the scheme to start it.

Well, when the business men read that article, and saw who Mark got his information from and all, they were pretty sick, because they had already gone into it and put up quite a lot of money. Some of them came in to see Mark, but he said he wouldn't talk then, but would wait till the meeting that night.

That's what he did. We all went to it. Spragg was there, looking pretty sick, and Lawyer Jones went with us. First Spragg raved and talked, but it didn't do any good. They had formed a company, and Spragg had *some* money in it, as well as anybody else. He didn't like to see the way things were going. And besides, he wasn't getting even with Mark.

Then Mark got up and repeated some of his figures, and ended up by saying:

"You've g-g-got up a company to run a n-newspaper, so why don't you run one? We f-f-fellers has got to go back to school, but we've built up the *Trumpet* so's it's a *good* paper, with fifteen hunderd subscribers, and it's m-makin' good money. Now, why don't you buy it, you b-business men, and run it for the benefit of Wicksville and yourselves? Hire a good editor and give this county the b-b-best

newspaper in the State. It's all ready. All you got to do is t-take it over. We'll sell cheap."

"How much?" says Mr. Pawl, who was the chairman.

"Well," says Mark, "we got our p-plant and stock, that's worth s-somethin'. We got fifteen hunderd subscribers, and that's worth a lot, for they've got a year to run, and we've got cash in the bank. About twelve hunderd d-d-dollars. I'll tell you what. Give us t-t-two thousand dollars, and we'll call it a deal."

Well, they figgered, and Lawyer Jones figgered with them, and Mark figgered with them, until at last they agreed, and a contract was made and signed sayin' the money would be paid over next day. Then Mark says:

"You're goin' to n-need an editor right off. You got a n-newspaper man here. Maybe he hain't acted jest right to us, but for all that, maybe he's a good man. Why d-don't you give Spragg a chance at b-bein' editor? He's worked to git up this company of yourn. It 'll be up to him to make good."

Spragg looked queer at Mark, but didn't say a word till the meeting decided to give him a try. Then he walked over to Mark and says, holding out his hand:

"What you just did, Mark Tidd, is a mighty fine thing, and I'm going to deserve it. And if you're ever looking for a friend come to me—Spragg." That was all.

And so I guess that's about all of everything. We sold out for two thousand dollars, which Mark divided between us, fair and square, and we put it in the bank. We knew Mark was a business man, and he had done things before that made folks take notice, but I don't know as he'll ever do a job of work harder than taking a busted-down newspaper that he bought for three-four hunderd dollars, and making it a first-class newspaper, and selling out for such a profit—just to pass away a vacation.

Some day he's going to make Rockefeller hustle.

THE END